

Author: **Yusaku Sakaishi**

Illustrator: **Heiro**

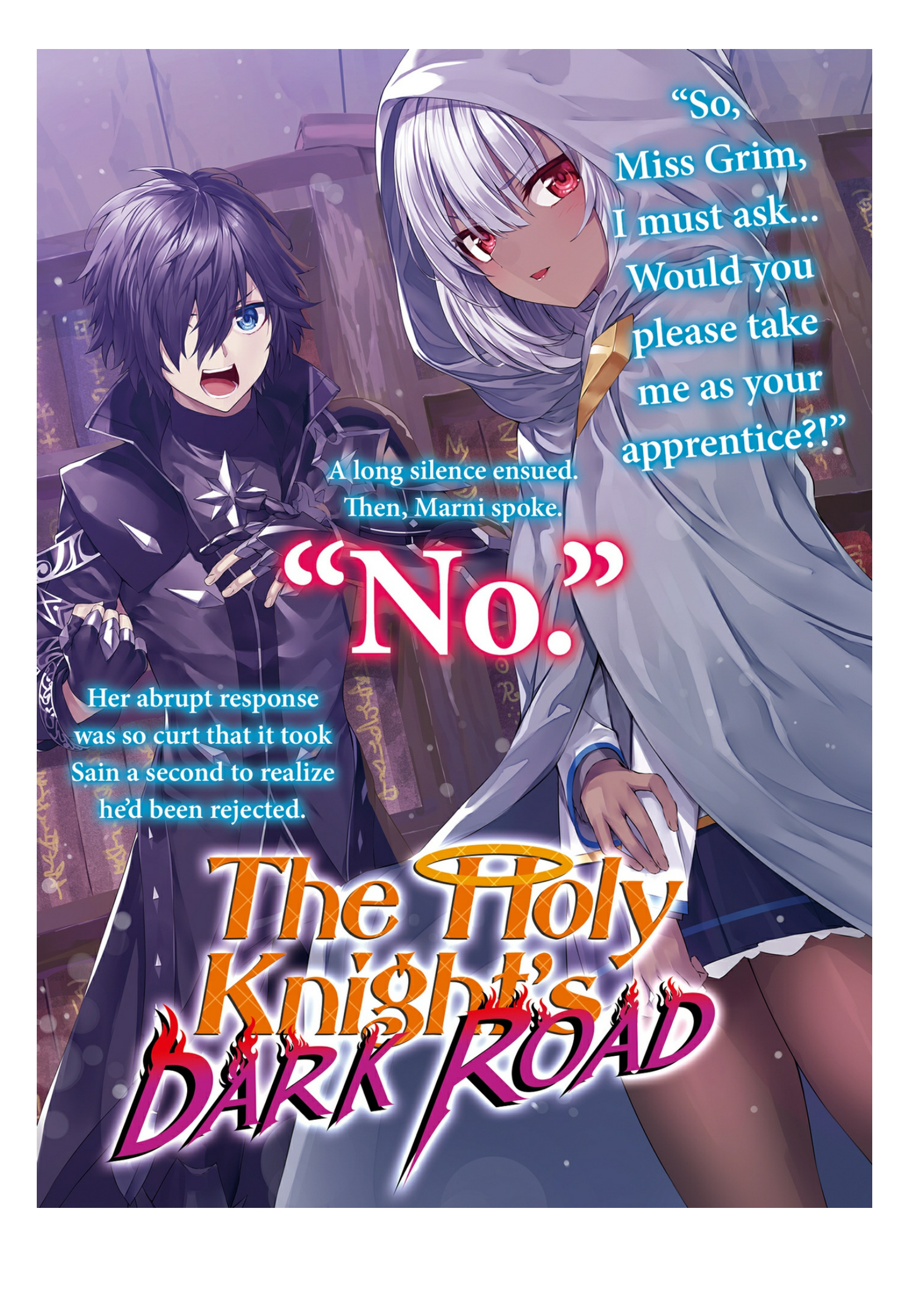


The Holy Knight's DARK ROAD

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VISIT...

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“So,
Miss Grim,
I must ask...
Would you
please take
me as your
apprentice?!”

A long silence ensued.
Then, Marni spoke.

“No.”

Her abrupt response
was so curt that it took
Sain a second to realize
he'd been rejected.

The Holy Knight's DARK ROAD



Marni

She is a young dark elf girl whose race faces rampant discrimination. She keeps her ears and skin color hidden, spending her days as a recluse in the library tower. Being a dark elf, she has great mastery over dark magic.

Melia

She is Sain's personal maid. Her skills are top-notch, far outstripping most of her peers in the academy. She likes teasing her master, Sain.

Sain Fostess

He is a young boy who, despite being the strongest holy knight in history, strives to become the dark knight. Growing increasingly anxious about his incompetence with dark magic, he runs into Marni, a dark elf girl whose race commands his undying admiration, and requests to become her apprentice.

Alicia Remia

She is a young girl who, after meeting Sain and understanding how to use her own power, managed to rid herself of her reputation as a loser. She commands a special power known as holy fire.

A character with dark, spiky hair and a determined expression, wearing a dark jacket with a white collar. He is surrounded by a swirling, dark, smoky energy. The background is a deep blue with some lighter blue highlights.

Never give up.

He must never
allow his will to falter.
Even in the face of despair,
even if everyone else had
given up hope, he had
to keep reaching past
the darkness for the
victory that lay
beyond.

“Dark Ray!”

The dark spear began its flight.
It lanced through the air and disappeared
into the woods like a shooting star,
leaving a black trail in its wake.

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Prologue

There was no floor... and no ceiling.

It was an endless space of white that extended as far as the eye could see. The ground — or what passed for it — felt like a vast expanse of clouds, and his steps produced no palpable sensation of contact. Sain knew right away that this was not reality.

I'm in a dream.

He knew with absolute certainty that he was currently not within the confines of reality, but rather his own dreams. After all, this wasn't his first time being here. Until very recently, he'd been having this same dream all the time. This was the place where he'd conversed with her.

"...Goddess."

"Here! I'm here! Goddess incoming!"

Soon after the voice rang out in the empty space, a woman appeared in a flowing white outfit, her golden hair falling over her azure eyes. The woman was the goddess, or more specifically, the goddess of light, Vicitaelia. She was an honest-to-god, er, honest-to-goddess deity, and belief in her was widespread throughout the West Continent.



Normally, the goddess could not directly interact with humans. Sain, however, was an exception. In taking up the mantle of the holy knight, he'd sworn to be the goddess's sword and shield.

"It's been a while since you've shown up in my dreams like this... You were popping up on almost a daily basis until just a while ago. What's the matter?"

"Mmm, nothing in particular. I just thought that, since you're starting school, it'd be better for me to stay out of your dreams until you've settled in."

"I see. That's very considerate of you."

"Oh, it was nothing. Don't wo— No! Wait a minute!" The goddess suddenly raised her voice. "I came here to ask you something!"

She glared at him with angry pufferfish cheeks and said, "Sain!"

"What?"

"Are you still trying to become the dark knight?!"

"Of course."

"Hnnnngh, hnnnnngh..."

Sain watched her groan in frustration for a while before letting out a sigh. When he was a child, he'd sworn to be the goddess's sword and shield. In exchange, he'd been granted her blessing and became the one and only holy knight. However, he made it clear that he intends to put down his mantle of the holy knight and resign. Now, he was aiming to become the knight of the goddess's opposite number. In other words, he wanted to become the dark knight.

The holy knight was the one who saved the good, while the dark knight was the one who punished the evil. The holy knight was praised by the people for helping, protecting, and guiding those in need.. Meanwhile, the dark knight was feared by the people for hunting, threatening, and killing those who were guilty. As a result, unlike the holy knight, the dark knight was seen in a negative light by the populace. That, however, was probably not what the goddess was talking about. Sain knew that this lady before him was just upset that he wanted to quit his job as her knight.

“J-Just so you know, I’m still not okay with this! You’re *my* knight, Sain dear! I’ll never let him have you!”

“Hah. Unfortunately, you won’t have your way. I’m going to become the dark knight, and that’s that. This future is inevitable.”

“No you won’t! You won’t you won’t you won’t!”

“I can and I will! Mark my words. I’m going to become the dark knight one way or another. Even if you say no, the darkness... it pulls me toward its infinite depths. Ha ha ha... It’s too late. The darkness has me. This is my fate!”

“I know what people at school are calling you these days, by the way! *Darkness Dork!*”

“How do you know that?!”

For Sain, his new nickname was extremely humiliating. Its origin was obvious, of course, and was a fitting moniker for a fellow who, despite not having a shred of talent, spent all day going on and on about doom and darkness and how he was going to become the dark knight. His jet black outfit didn’t help matters, as it made him stick out like a sore thumb. As a result, his fellow classmates had honored him with a unique nickname, demoting him from merely stupid to *Darkness Dork*. They say there’s only a thin line between a genius and a fool, but in Sain’s case, he was a mile away from the line on the fool’s side of the court.

“I’m your master, Sain dear. Naturally, it’s my responsibility to watch over my knight!” the goddess declared proudly as she placed a hand over her voluminous chest.

Sain rolled his eyes and muttered, “Peeper.”

“P-P-Peeper?! You take that back! I’m no peeper! I’m just watching over you!”

“That’s what it means to peep, damn it!”

“Y-You could have said no! I would have stopped!”

“The fact that I even need to say so is the problem!”

To her credit, the goddess had a point. Had Sain made a clear refusal in his head to her watching over or interfering with him, she would have gotten the

message and backed off. However, making a conscious effort to deny her permission on a daily basis was tiresome, and it'd also make him feel a little guilty. Nevertheless, he needed to keep her out of his life.

I can't let her find out.

She didn't know the true reason behind why he was avoiding her — why he was trying to become the dark knight. He'd kept it from her, because if he told her now, it'd only make her sad. It wasn't time yet.

"...Anyway, unless you have a good reason, could you stop peeking from now on?"

"Hnngh... b-but, it's my responsibility to watch over you..."

"No, it's not."

During all of their interactions, the goddess's obsessive overprotection left him feeling weary to the core. This time was no different. Even in his dreams, he could feel the fatigue setting in. Chances are, he was going to wake up with a goddess-induced hangover.

"I swear, the things I put up with... Did you hear anything else that you shouldn't have?"

"Wh-What do you mean shouldn't have? It's not like I'm spying on you all the time... Hmm..."

She put a contemplative finger to her chin for a while before something came to her.

"Oh, on that note, it's almost time for that, right? The thing they do in the academy."

"What thing?"

"Um, what was it again? That thing. Mmm..."

She kept twirling her finger in the air, as if she was trying to draw out a thread from a tangled ball of memories. After some time, she clapped her hands together excitedly.

"Oh, I remember! The field exercises!"

Chapter 1: The Master of the Library Tower

Jenifa Royal Magic Academy was located within Raskas, the capital of the Kingdom of Loribania. As the largest educational institution within the kingdom, it attracted the enrollment of many young nobles. Within the academy, however, any differences in social standing would soon be dwarfed by its overwhelming culture of meritocracy. Jenifa was unique in that those who lacked competence were looked down on, nobility or not. As a result, it was not uncommon for many students to drop out.

A month had passed since the entrance ceremony, and Sain was just barely keeping up in class. After a groggy awakening following his hectic dream encounter with the goddess, he made an effort to clear his head and focus.

“In one month, you’ll be participating in field exercises,” said Elina Rastania during their morning homeroom briefing before the first period began. Standing before the lectern, she looked across the room at her first-year students of the class of 1-4. “The field exercises this year will take place in Trowa Forest, about a half day’s trip by carriage from the city’s west gate. You will be tasked with surviving for a total of ten days in the forest.”

There were a number of events that the academy organized, and the field exercises were one of them. Sain had heard a couple of things about the event during his first few days here. Normally, school events were meant to be fun student experiences, but this was the top institution of learning in the kingdom,

famous for its meritocratic absolutism. Here, school events were not meant to entertain students, but rather to weed out the weak. The field exercises were one of the most important events in the school term for the first-years of the intermediate division.

From forests and rocky cliffs, to sandy dunes and deserted islands, students were forced to survive for ten days in environments where they would be exposed to the raw hostility of nature. Furthermore, self-sufficiency was expected. For students who were habituated to the effortless procurement of food and drink, surviving in the wild was a difficult task, one that would take a significant toll on their physical and mental stamina. On top of that, all previous instances of the event had taken place in locations that were densely populated by monsters. Students not only had to worry about sources of food, but also needed to defend themselves.

While this might seem difficult enough by itself, Jenifa was the kind of school to go the extra mile. Their field exercises were not only about survival.

“I’m sure some of you know already, but in addition to testing your survival skills, the field exercises will simultaneously feature a battle royale between the participating students. Defeating an enemy team will earn your team one point. Surviving for the full ten days will earn your team five points. At the end of the event, the team with the most points wins. You’ll be arranging yourselves into teams of four. Starting today, you’re free to begin looking for teammates. There are no special rules regarding team composition; all first-year students are fair game, even if they happen to be from another class. Though there is still a month to go before the event begins, you’ll need time to practice your teamwork, so I suggest you figure out your teams early.”

A nervous air descended on the room following Elina’s explanation. Selecting the right team members was crucial for the field exercises. In order to outmaneuver rivals and claim victory in the end, it was necessary to begin planning as soon as possible.

“By the way, the top three teams will receive prizes. Third place will receive a half-year’s supply of meal tickets. Second place will receive a permit for overnight stays outside the academy. Finally, first place will receive the privilege of making a single request of the headmaster.”

Once she mentioned the rewards, the classroom burst into a loud commotion. Preferential treatment toward competent students was a major feature of the academy. For Sain, the third place reward of a half-year's supply of meal tickets was rather appealing. At the same time, the reward for first place intrigued him as well. For obvious reasons, being able to make a request of the headmaster must also imply the fulfillment of said request; it'd be a pretty terrible reward otherwise. While it probably wasn't a blank check, the headmaster was likely willing to go to considerable lengths to comply.

"On the other hand, the bottom three teams will have their homework loads increased and will be required to clean up the forest after the event. In particular, the post-event cleanup is said to be quite a nightmare, so I'd recommend that you all put your back into it. I earnestly hope that none of the students from *this* class," she said, shooting a murderous glare toward Sain, "will be in one of the bottom three teams. That's all for now."

The glare caused Sain to recoil in surprise. He watched with a puzzled look as Elina left the classroom, wondering what he'd done to deserve such animosity. Eventually, he shrugged; he simply couldn't imagine why.

With the teacher gone, the students began chatting amongst themselves. A girl with blond hair rose from a nearby seat and walked over to Sain.

"Wow, it totally slipped my mind," said Alicia Remia, "but yeah, the field exercises are happen— Huh, what's the matter with you?"

"I have no idea why, but right before the teacher left... I'm pretty sure she glared at me."

"Ah... Now that you mention it, I do remember hearing something about the field exercise results affecting teacher evaluations. She's probably hoping we all perform well. The better the students from her class do, the better it is for her, probably."

"I see. In other words, she's expecting great things from—"

"Everyone but you, I'm pretty sure."

Sain grunted with displeasure at Alicia's blunt rebuttal.

"Well, it looks like Master Sain lost his brains again. Don't worry. He drops

them all the time,” chimed a third voice.

“Damn it, maid,” said Sain, turning toward a black-haired girl in an attendant’s uniform.

As she approached, she held her hand over her forehead and made an exaggerated gesture, as if she was looking for something.

“Where did they go this time, Master Sain? Here, let me help you look for them. Oh, is that part of them?” she asked, pointing at a particularly fat dust bunny on the ground.

“You know, sometimes, the things you say really hurt.”

“I’m just joking.”

The girl’s name was Melia, but for *reasons*, Sain had to avoid calling her by her name. Consequently, he referred to her simply as his maid. Likewise, his nickname for Alicia was Miss Gold.

“Okay, enough nonsense,” said Alicia. “The field exercises. What are you two planning to do?”

Melia didn’t reply. Sain glanced at Alicia but also refrained from commenting. Melia would almost certainly be on his team, since she was his attendant. Alicia would probably join them, as well. After all, she had no friends. It wasn’t like there was anywhere else for her to go. It seemed safe to assume that the three of them were already locked in— “U-Um, Alicia, I was just wondering... Would you like to team up with me?!”

“Wait, what?!”

Sain spun around so fast he almost gave himself whiplash. He stared incredulously at the person who had just invited Alicia to a team. It was one of the male students in his class. Glancing at Alicia revealed that she was as shocked as he was. Had he thought about it more carefully, however, he would have known that this wasn’t a surprising development.

Though Alicia Remia had been branded a loser for a good portion of her life, that all came to an end last month. After meeting Sain and realizing she had a special power known as holy fire, she quickly shed her previous stigma. All the

hard work she'd put in over the years now began to bear fruit, and her abilities were considered well above the class average.

"Alicia, forget about that guy! Come to my team!"

"I've always wanted to be friends with you!"

A crowd quickly formed around Alicia. Surrounded by a circle of new fans, she fumbled for words, but there was no mistaking the glee in her expression.

Across from her was a separate circle, at the center of which was Melia.

"Melia! Please! Join my te—"

"Whoa, wait your turn! Melia, come with us! We're obviously—"

"Don't bother with them! Come with me—"

Meila's celebrity was no surprise. Her charming features attracted plenty of admirers, but more importantly, her grades had consistently been at the top of the class. She had a very good chance at claiming victory in the field exercises.

"..."

Her master, meanwhile, was completely ignored. He sat alone, flanked by two raucous crowds that paid him absolutely no attention. For a moment, he wondered if he'd somehow turned invisible. Eventually, he slowly stood up and placed a hand on the shoulder of one of the boys of Alicia's circle.

"Heh, there's no need for such urgency. If you're missing a man, then perhaps I can be of—"

"Get out of here, Darkness Dork!"

"D-Don't call me that!"

Sadly, his nickname had already gained too much traction, and his protesting only earned him a few more derisive shouts of his hated moniker. Furthermore, after being refused so flatly, the precariousness of his current situation began to dawn on him. He looked at Melia and Alicia, his eyes desperate and pleading.

"W-Wait... You two, please... Don't...!" he begged, his usual swagger nowhere to be seen. Despite his nickname, he wasn't an actual idiot. He knew very well that if the girls abandoned him right now, he'd never find another team. As he

made sad puppy-dog eyes at them in turn, they both sighed and turned to their respective crowds.

“Sorry, but I already decided who I’m teaming up with.”

“Likewise, I’ve made up my mind too. My apologies.”

The two girls waded out of the crowd and stopped beside Sain.

“Geez, you didn’t have to get that worked up. I wasn’t going to leave you out in the cold,” said Alicia, her cheeks reddening a little.

“Same here. I’m technically your attendant, after all.” Melia’s expression remained as listless as always, but she did keep her eyes on the ceiling as she spoke.

The hint of embarrassment in their voices was endearing, and Sain felt a wave of hot emotion rise in his chest.

“You two... I...” he said, his voice cracking a little. “This... This is what they call *tsundere*, isn’t it?”

“Well, Melia, looks like we have to fill two more spots on our team.”

“Those two over there look pretty good. Let’s go ask them.”

“Waaaaaah! I’m kidding! I’m just kidding!”

After much pleading and apologizing, it was decided that their team did, in fact, only need one more member.

“The problem is the last one,” said Melia. “Who are we going to ask?”

“Miss Gold, you’ve been here since the junior division, haven’t you? Does anyone you know seem like they’d be a good candidate?”

“Good question... I do have one person in mind.”

“What’s this person like?” asked Melia.

Alicia thought about it for a moment before answering.

“Due to, uh... some special circumstances, she doesn’t really associate with other people. But she’s not a bad person. I promise you that,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “She’s known as... the master of the library

tower.”

After school, the three of them immediately made their way to the library tower to meet its purported master. According to Alicia, whenever the student in question had time, she’d spend it holed up in the library tower. Now that classes were done for the day, she was guaranteed to be there.

“But if she refuses to associate with other people, then how did you get to know her, Miss Gold?”

“...Because, until very recently, I was pretty much the same,” she answered in a solemn tone as they walked down a hallway. “Until I met you two, I was alone a lot of the time, too. When you’re like that, sometimes you just want to find a quiet place where you can sort of... Well, breathe. I was looking around one day and ended up in the library tower. I had nothing to do, so I just wandered around, and that’s when I ran into the master of the library tower... Maybe she pitied me or something. I don’t know. But sometimes she came to chat with me.”

A hint of nostalgia crept into her voice as she spoke.

“How come this person doesn’t want to be social?”

She looked at Melia and lowered her voice.

“...You’ll know when you see her.”

She said nothing else. Sain and Melia looked at each other, but neither of them ventured another question. Eventually, the three of them arrived at the library tower.

Jenifa provided a variety of facilities to its students to support their studies, the most prominent of which was doubtlessly the library tower. Within its walls of gray stone were thousands of books that held an unmatched trove of knowledge.

“Hm... I’ve never seen so many books in one place,” mused Sain as he looked around the inside with awe.

The tower had five floors, the first and second of which were fairly busy. While no one was shouting up a storm, sporadic chatter and the odd argument

maintained an audible but pleasant ambience in the room.

“The higher you go, the more specialized the books get. The ones you use for class and homework are mostly on the first two floors,” explained Alicia as they climbed up the stairs toward the third and fourth floors.

A glance at the stacks revealed her words to be true, as the words in the titles were longer and the books themselves thicker. There were also far fewer students on these floors, and the noises of the first two floors dimmed to a muted hum.

“Hm? Is there nobody on the fourth floor?”

“People don’t really come here... The master is up there, after all,” Alicia said, pointing at the ceiling.

It appeared that the master of the library tower resided on the top floor.

“Are people scared of the tower’s master?”

“...Yeah.”

Alicia grimaced as they climbed the final flight of stairs onto the fifth floor.

“Wh-What in the...”

Sain’s eyes widened at the sight. The fifth floor looked nothing like the other four. On all the floors down below, windows on the walls allowed in ample sunlight, ensuring it was bright enough to read. Here, however, all the windows were blocked by curtains, allowing not a single ray of light in. A few lamps hung from the ceiling, but they only emitted a dim, purple glow.

“It’s so dark I can barely see anything,” complained Melia.

“...I like this place, actually. It... speaks to me.”

As he stood in the dimly lit hallway of the fifth floor, he felt a connection with the surrounding darkness. A switch flipped in his head. Darkness Dork mode, engage!

“As a denizen of darkness, this space suits me well. I see that the master of this tower is a lady of most excellent taste. Ah... I can feel it... The beast within me stirs, and it growls with pleasure—”

“Shut up already.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Sain, for whom apologizing had become more or less a reflex.

By the time his brain registered the fact that the voice had come from the other side of the room, the words had long left his mouth. He looked awkwardly at his two companions, who smirked at him, and turned in the direction of the voice. As he peered through the darkness, he found a spot in the room where a huge number of books had been taken out of the stacks and piled up in massive heaps that formed a circle. At the center of it sat a girl.

“Hey, Marni. Long time.”

“Alicia...”

The girl named Marni looked at Alicia with mild astonishment. She wore a gray cloak that covered her from head to toe. Though her face and figure were obscured, her voice and frame suggested she was of a similar age to Alicia.

“So...” Sain said as he looked her over. “You’re the master of the library tower?”

He decided that he quite liked her fashion sense.

“...I’m aware that there are people who call me that,” she answered in a way that was roundabout but definitely affirmative.

Since Sain couldn’t refer to people by their real name, he always needed nicknames. Seeing as the girl already had an established nickname — the master of the library tower — he could simply keep using that, but...

It’s missing something!

“The Master of the Library Tower” just wasn’t doing it for him. It didn’t speak to his soul. While he basically just went with the first thing that came to mind for Alicia, the girl before him was giving off the exact kind of aura that appealed to him. Something about the way she stood in the darkness, surrounded by stacks of thick tomes, was striking a serious chord with Sain. He needed a more fitting name for her — one that would suit her ominous presence.

“The Lord of Darkness... Bookshelves... Pages filled with distilled wisdom that

melt into the murky gloom... Ah-hah! I have it! I shall bestow upon you, O Cloaked Reaper of the Stacks, a name that most becomes you! From now on, you shall be Grim Editor!" he declared confidently, his eyes brimming with pride.

Behind him, Alicia and Melia both pressed their hands to their faces and shook their heads.

"Is that my nickname?"

"Yes! Isn't it cool?! But, hm, it's sort of long... Since we already have a Miss Gold, let's shorten it in the same way and go with Miss Grim."

"Wow, that sure got watered down fast," muttered Alicia with a roll of her eyes.

"...It doesn't really sound cool to me," said Marni as she pulled back her cloak, "but the whole Grim Reaper idea probably isn't all that far off the mark."

The cloak slipped off her back and fell onto the floor, revealing a girl whose appearance made Sain's eyes go wide. He couldn't look away, mesmerized by her long silver hair that reached down to the ground, her amber eyes that glittered with intelligence, her youthful but attractive features, and her delicate frame — so slender it seemed like it might snap at the lightest touch. And, of course, her long, pointed ears, as well as skin that seemed to have soaked in the color of the darkness around her.

"...A dark elf," Sain heard himself murmur.

Dark elves were not human, but rather a different race of beings that once called the forests home. Most of them were born as darkkind, giving them the ability to wield dark magic, and in recent years, there was a growing obsession among dark elves to prevent the deterioration of their powers by preserving the purity of their bloodlines. As a result, they'd become an increasingly isolated race that had little contact with humans. Their social attitude, however, was not what made them known throughout the world. It was a unique power that they possessed.

"The race that can use curses..." he said in a soft, spellbound voice. Marni's eyes were round and wide, but also dim and lifeless. There was an eerie, doll-

like air to her that made Sain's hairs stand on end.

Magical genus — the term that referred to the category of magic that one had the most aptitude for — was often inherited through blood. Consequently, the genus of one's progeny could be actively manipulated through the choice of one's spouse; extended family groups that took steps to ensure their blood mixed with only those of the same genus were referred to as clans. The dark elf obsession with purity of blood was on a whole other level. For a time, their entire race had essentially functioned as one massive clan. This had allowed them to devote a great deal of effort and time toward the research of dark magic, in the process of which a select few found that a new ability had awakened within them — curses.

Possessed solely by dark elves, all curses were terrible spells that took dreadfully gruesome tolls on their targets. Unlike regular magic, they had only a single goal: kill in ways that would cause as much suffering as possible. In an effort to avoid contact with other races and protect the forests they lived in, there had been many instances in the past when dark elves had wielded curses against intruders. As a result, word of their ghastly effects quickly spread throughout the world, which made dark elves the object of great fear and superstition.

As time passed, dark elves became more accepting of interaction with other races. The reasons were unclear, but there were likely limits to how long they could sustain their in-breeding. In addition, the advancement of civilizations in the outside world could have forced their hand — they could either engage with them or risk being left entirely behind.

Many modern dark elves were of mixed blood, and very few of them could still use curses. The widespread perception of their ability to do so, however, coupled with lingering tales of their cruelty, ensured that the fear remained alive and well. Discrimination and persecution against dark elves were part of an ongoing reality.

"If you're done looking around, then leave," said Marni, her tone cold and blunt.

The cause of her isolation was now clear. Dark elves were feared and

shunned. It was extremely likely that she kept to herself all the time, not through choice, but by cruel necessity.

“We’re not here to sightsee, Marni,” said Alicia. “You know the field exercises next month? We want you to join our team.”

Marni gave her a look that questioned her sanity.

“...Are you serious?” There was a hint of irritation in her voice. “In case you forgot, I’m a dark elf. Even if you’re okay with it, Alicia, what are those two going to think?”

Marni eyed Sain and Melia with a cold, lifeless gaze. Sain felt his fists shaking. He tightened them.

“Dark elves...” he said, his voice trembling. “The rumors of your race... I’ve heard them as well. There had been a time when the whole race behaved as a single clan and, in your unwavering devotion to the arcana of darkness, you gave birth to curses — a power that transcended the knowledge of man...”

Sain took a step forward. His body swayed a little, as though he was about to fall. His head was down, and he continued to approach her with uneven steps.

“An expert in dark magic...” He suddenly looked up and screamed, “I... I’ve been waiting so long to meet you!”

“Huh?”

Marni met his passion with incredulity, but Sain was far too excited to pause.

“Sure, the whole curses thing is ancient history now, but I heard that dark elves remain masters of dark magic! You were and still are the race that’s most proficient at it! Please! I ask — no, I *implore* you! Please teach me your dark magic!”

“Wh-What? What’s the matter with you...?”

His fervent pleading flustered her and thoroughly shattered her affectless front.

“This *is* the matter with him...” said Alicia with an exasperated sigh. “It’s why I brought him, actually. These two found out about my *deficiency*, and they still treated me the same as before. On top of that, they even helped me towards

my goal. So don't worry. These two, Sain and Melia... I guarantee you they're good people. In fact, one of them is probably too good for his own, erm, good."

After hearing Alicia's explanation, Marni's eyes widened with astonishment. Sain's widened as well, though his were open with excitement. Apparently, bringing them here to meet Marni was a display of trust on Alicia's part. That was good to know.

"Allow me to introduce myself properly. I am Sain Fostess, he who is consumed by darkness. That much, however, should be apparent."

"Consumed... by darkness?" Marni eyed him questioningly.

Then, Melia stepped out from behind him and introduced herself as well.

"I'm Melia, and I'm the attendant to our friendly neighborhood weirdo here. By the way, just between us, my master has a habit of losing his brains when he's running around, so feel free to ignore everything he says."

"My brains are right here, thank you very much!" protested Sain as he pointed a finger toward his head.

Marni watched their back-and-forth in mute incredulity.

"Well, Marni? What do you think? Not exactly the discriminating type, are they? So... Yeah. Getting back to where we started. Will you join our team for the field exercises?" asked Alicia with a smile.

Marni spent a few seconds in silent contemplation. Then, she answered in a soft voice.

"No, I won't."

Alicia did a double take in shock.

"...Why?"

"Because I don't feel like I'll win if I team up with you people." Her answer was curt and clear. "I'm aiming for first place in the field exercises. I don't want to team up with anyone who'll just be dead weight."

"...You're saying we'll be dead weight?"

"You heard me." Marni's tone was cold and business-like. "I can win the field

exercises on my own. I just need my teammates to focus on protecting themselves. You... can't do that."

She looked Alicia in the eye before continuing.

"Alicia, I might be your friend, but that doesn't mean I have anything good to say about your abilities. Your deficiency is going to be a critical weakness in the field exercises. It makes it impossible for you to even protect yourself. I... don't want to have you on my team."

Her friend's blunt rejection hit hard, and Alicia winced. Before she could speak, however, Sain stepped in.

"In that case, you have no need to worry. Miss Gold has already overcome her deficiency."

He returned the favor with a statement of equal impact, causing Marni's eyes to go wide.

"Besides," he continued, "Miss Grim, do you have any other candidates for your team? If not, then that's even more reason to join up with her. Teamwork will likely be an important element during the field exercises. Even if you require all your teammates to focus on defending themselves, the better you know each other, the better you'll both perform."

While it was possible that Marni was strong enough to be a one-woman army, the field exercises were not just a battle royale, but also a survival test. Food needed to be procured, beds had to be prepared, and nightly sentries were required. With a mountain of duties and only four people to attend to them, smooth teamwork was of the essence.

"Also, I just want to be on your team! Please! Show me the power of the dark elves! I've been hoping to meet one of you for years! I'm serious!"

"He actually has," interjected Melia. "Just for the record."

"Please! Show me! Teach me what it means to wield true darkness!" he said as he approached Marni with expectant eyes.

"Ugh, I've had enough of this." The corners of her tiny lips turned downward in annoyance. "You talk pretty big... so let's see you back it up. Prove to me you

won't be dead weight. Right here, right now."

She stuck her hands out in front of her and gathered an enormous amount of magical energy in her palms.

"Great torrent of darkness, drown the land in seas of black — Velle Darku!"

True darkness appeared, deeper and blacker than the mere dimness that filled the room. A large wave of the stuff surged forth. It was thick and heavy, as if the depths of the ocean had been moved here and were now crashing down on them.

Sain hadn't expected her to unleash such a large-scale spell indoors. Furthermore, while its power was great, it also did not lack for finesse. A quick glance at the stacks revealed that the books near the spell's effects remained completely unharmed.

What to do?

A number of options arose in Sain's mind. If he wished to neutralize the wave of dark magic, light magic would be ideal. His best bet might be to unleash Melia's power as his attendant.

"...Sain."

His thoughts were interrupted by Alicia's voice. He looked at her and discovered that her ruby-colored eyes were ablaze with determination. He nodded, trusting in her resolve.

"It's all yours."

As he stepped back, she took his place and immediately held her hands out toward the oncoming wave.

"Great torrent of fire, turn all into ashen seas — Velle Flaram!"

Alicia undoubtedly thought of Marni as a friend. Hearing that friend call her dead weight must have hurt. There was no way she would take that sitting down. A wave of fire surged forward from her hands, glowing with blinding white light. Powered by holy fire — a type of fiery light that purifies all forms of magic — it clashed with the dark current rushing toward them. The two neutralized each other, and Marni's dark magic vanished as it collided with

Alicia's.

Marni gaped at the result with her mouth open.

"No way... Alicia... How? Didn't your magic have no substanc—"

"I got better," Alicia interjected. "It's too bad you didn't know. Looks like someone's a little behind the times," she said as she casually brushed at some dust on her uniform. "Also, you know how you said you can win on your own? Here's some friendly advice: get out of here. I'm probably not the only one who got better while you were busy camping out in the library tower. I might be your friend, Marni... but I'm sick and tired of that cocky attitude of yours."

Her rebuttal paralleled Marni's previous statement with almost theatrical flair, and she delivered it with a defiant smile. Melia glanced at her and whispered, "Miss Alicia... you're sounding more and more like Master Sain these days."

"Wha—?! N-No... I... I'm turning into... him?!"

"Uh... I'd really appreciate it if you weren't so dramatic..." said Sain.

Alicia ignored him and continued to put on the kind of expression usually reserved for the discovery of a terminal illness. He sighed. It sort of hurt when she did that, actually.

"I take back what I said," said Marni after the shock wore off. "Alicia is not a dead weight. Also... I'd rather not have an enemy who can cancel out my magic."

"Then that means—"

"I have one condition, though," Marni interrupted. "If our team wins first place, then I want to be the one who makes a request of the headmaster. If you're okay with that, then I'll join your team."

Sain, Alicia, and Melia looked at each other. They all shrugged. None of them seemed opposed to the idea. In fact, none of them had even considered how they'd make use of the prize.

"Well, since it's obvious that none of us have any plans for it, I'd say it's fine to pass the chance to her," suggested Melia.

“...Sounds fine to me.”

“Agreed. All right, Miss Grim. We accept your condition,” declared Sain on behalf of their team.

“Okay... Then I’d like to join your team,” Marni said with a quick bow.

“You’re most welcome. It’s our pleasure to have you,” Sain replied, finalizing the last member of their team.

Melia and Alicia were both highly competent. Judging by the magic she just displayed, Marni was no slouch either. In terms of pure firepower, their team was definitely a force to be reckoned with.

“Now... we can finally discuss the other matter!”

“...The other matter?”

Sain’s enthusiastic grin was met with a puzzled look from Marni.

“The dark magic you just used... It was absolutely incredible. That menacing power... that ominous color... it was so utterly foreboding that it gave even a denizen of darkness like me the chills. Such dark, sinful power... How? How did you acquire it? I must know, or I shall never sleep at night again.”

“Uh.”

“So, Miss Grim, I must ask... Would you please take me as your apprentice?!”

He got onto his knees and lowered his head. A long silence ensued. Then, Marni spoke.

“No.”

“Thank— Wait what?!”

Her abrupt response was so curt that it took Sain a second to realize he’d be rejected. Aghast, he looked at her pleadingly, which only earned him an irritated grimace.

“It’s silly and makes no sense. Why do I have to spend my time teaching you?”

“B-Because, uh, it’s... a form of investment! You’re investing in the person who will one day become the dark knight—”

“The what? Dark knight? You?”

Marni looked him over from head to toe. Then, she scoffed at him.

“Looks like you really did lose your brains.”

“I didn’t, and I’m serious!” he yelled indignantly.

She let out a weary sigh.

“Whatever. Can you all just leave already? I’m tired.”

“W-Wait! At least take me as your appren— Gurk!”

He tried to crawl toward her but only managed to shuffle a few steps before Alicia hauled him away by the collar.

“Okay, okay, enough groveling, Sain. Time to go. See you, Marni. We’ll meet again soon and discuss our strategy.”

Alicia waved goodbye and headed back down the stairs. Melia made a slight bow as well before following. The last to disappear was Sain, kicking and screaming as he was dragged away.

“Tomorrow! After school! I’ll come again!”

“Please don’t.”

The next day, after school...

“I’ve come again, Miss Grim!”

“...So much for ‘please don’t.’”

Sain greeted her with a big smile. In response, she rubbed her temples.

They were in the same place as yesterday — on the top floor of the library tower. Melia and Alicia were off practicing on their own for the field exercises, so Sain had come by himself today. Realistically, he should probably also be practicing, but for him, nothing was more important than learning a new spell that used dark magic. Under the dim illumination of purple phosphorescence, he walked over to where Marni was sitting on the floor and made the same request as the previous day.

“Please teach me dark magic!”

“No.”

The same back-and-forth played out like a well-practiced routine. Sain rubbed his forehead on the ground, and Marni rejected him with cold indifference.

“Are you even darkkind to begin with?”

“Of course! I was chosen by the darkness!”

“For someone chosen by the darkness, you sure aren’t giving off a whole lot of dark magical energy... What’s your rank?”

All of a sudden, the room’s ceiling felt very intriguing to Sain, and his eyes couldn’t help but wander upward.

“U-Uh, my rank? Well, ehh...”

“Ehh? What? You’re A?”

“...No, I’m F.”

“Okay, we’re done here.” She fixed him with an icy glare. “You realize F is the average rank for the *junior* division, right? Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?”

“Hnngh... I-I am...”

“I’d be too embarrassed to step outside, if I were you.”

It felt a bit unfair to be told that by someone who spent all day holed up in the library tower, but Sain chose to let the irony slide. It was true, after all, that an F rank in middle school was a disgraceful grade. While aptitudes were decided at birth, the results of magical assessments could be improved through hard work. Of course, those with natural talent could post some very high ranks from the get-go, but even the most mediocre students could easily pull their grade up from F to an E with a bit of effort.

Unfortunately, it was said that darkkind and lightkind were diametrically opposed genres. Learning magic of a different genus was already inherently difficult. For Sain, who was actually lightkind, trying to learn dark magic was exponentially harder. That was why he wanted a mentor. In fact, it was why he enrolled in Jenifa to begin with. Having decided that there was a limit to what he could achieve through self-education, he sought a learning environment that would start with the basics and teach him the fundamentals of dark magic one

step at a time. To his dismay, however, after his abysmal result in the magical assessment, he was shunned by his teachers. Figuring he was a lost cause — which, given he was an F-ranker in middle school, was an entirely reasonable assumption — none of them showed any desire to associate with him.

Furthermore, within the meritocratic culture of the academy, both students and teachers looked only to results, and very little consideration was given to effort and enthusiasm. In the end, despite having come all the way to Jenifa, Sain still had no choice but to keep learning on his own.

Meeting Marni was, therefore, a stroke of unbelievably good luck for him. The only problem was that said stroke was missing the follow-through: he had finally found his mentor, but he couldn't get her to even look at him, never mind teach him anything.

"I agreed to join your team because I was impressed by Alicia's skill... but thinking back on it, I might have been too hasty in my decision. Is your attendant on the same level as you?"

"My attendant? Absolutely not. My maid's grades are exceptional. She's fivekind: B in fire and water, and C in the rest. Also, her physical assessment was D."

"...Okay, that *is* pretty exceptional."

"Right? Isn't my attendant awesome? I'm so proud of her," said Sain, beaming as brightly as if he himself had been praised.

"Which...would make you our only dead weight?"

"... .. It's possible that this statement is not incorrect."

"Dead weight it is."

Sain's roundabout logic failed to confuse Marni, and she let out a sigh.

"Didn't you say you wanted to become the dark knight? Do you seriously think you can? You, with your F rank?" she asked bemusedly.

"Yes." He answered immediately. There wasn't the slightest hint of hesitation. "I can— No, I will. I *will* become the dark knight."

"...You will, huh." She nodded, the motion more contemplative than mocking.

“But I still won’t teach you anything.”

“Thank— Wait, what?! Again?!”

“...Just go study on your own if you want to learn. There are plenty of books here, after all, and nobody’s stopping you from reading them.”

She gestured toward the stacks before shooing him away. He grunted and groaned in frustration for a while, but eventually — after realizing that he could produce no counter-argument — his shoulders fell and he plodded away toward the stacks she’d pointed at. He pulled out a book about dark magic, flipped through a few pages to verify its contents, and closed it again. Then, he walked over to Marni, sat down right beside her, and began reading.

“...Go away. You’re too close.”

He shuffled sideways a little.

“There.”

“...You’re still too close.”

He shuffled some more.

“There.”

“...Just go downstairs.”

“The darkness here is comforting. I can focus better here... probably. Speaking of which, why is it so dark here on the fifth floor?”

“Almost nobody comes to the fifth floor, so I remodeled it to my liking. This way, even fewer people come.”

Apparently, the dark ambience wasn’t just personal taste; it was also for keeping people away.

“But isn’t it bad for your eyes to be reading books in such a dark place?”

“Dark elves can see fine in the darkness.”

“Gah! Again! Just... so *cool*! A denizen of darkness indeed...”

The thought of a race that was perfectly at home in the darkness was so awesome that Sain couldn’t help but gaze at her in awe. They’d only known

each other for two days, but Marni had already become an object of admiration for him.

“Aren’t you scared of me?”

“Scared? Why?”

They stared at each other in equal and honest bafflement.

“Well... I’m a dark elf.”

“Yeah! And that’s just the coolest thing! A freaking *dark elf*! Ugh, I can’t even...”

“C-Cooler thing?”

“It’s in your name. You’ve got dark *in your name*! How much cooler can you get? I’m so jealous. It’s as if you’re destined to be one with the darkness.” He let out an envious sigh. “I guess this is what it means to be the chosen race...”

Marni made no reply, and the conversation naturally drew to a close. They each occupied themselves with their respective books. A peaceful silence descended upon the pair, occasionally punctuated by the rustle of paper. Sain was absorbed in the thick tome he held, carefully reading each page before flipping to the next. At times, Marni would shoot a bemused glance at him, but his eyes never left his book. Eventually, she got up and slowly walked over to a nearby bookshelf, from which she extracted a book.

“...If you want to learn dark magic, then this book is better for you,” she said, handing it to him. “Unlike fire or water, dark magic is difficult to explain with words. It’s less about knowledge and more about visualization. For beginners, it’s better to use a textbook with pictures and diagrams.”

“Huuuh... I see,” he murmured as he thumbed through a few pages. “You’re right. This is much easier to understand... Miss Grim, you have my gratitude!”

“...Keep it. I don’t want your gratitude. And don’t expect any more help. Now leave me alone.”

She sat down again and went back to her decidedly less beginner-friendly text. Sain did as told and quietly flipped open his new book as well. The peaceful silence descended once more. Marni continued to sneak occasional

glances at Sain. Each time, she found him happily absorbed in his reading.

And so they continued, two motionless figures seated quietly in the hazy dimness of an otherwise empty floor, until the library tower closed for the night.



Chapter 2: A Mentorship of Darkness

The next day, as soon as school finished, Sain made a beeline for the library tower again. Upon discovering her in the same place as last night, he promptly walked over, plopped himself down beside her, and, in a most natural fashion, said, “So, I read this part in the book and I was wondering—”

“Why are you just assuming I’m going to answer you?” She rubbed at her temples. “Look, if you just want to learn magic, it’d be faster for you to just ask one of the teachers.”

“Yeah, I considered that... but when it comes to dark magic, I still think I’d make more progress if *you* taught me, Miss Grim. The spell you showed us last time was masterful in its execution, and you were also the one who recommended this book to me.”

“Sure, but...”

“Also, I just want to learn from you. Plain and simple.”

His final reason caused her to stiffen. A few moments later, she started playing with the ends of her silver hair and murmured, “I can maybe hear you out, I guess.”

“Really?! Oh, man, you’re a lifesaver! Thank you so much!”

“I-I didn’t say I’ll answer! I’ll listen, but that’s it!” she added, embarrassed by his excessive outpouring of gratitude.

“Okay, first question. I was trying to visualize this spell, and I’m wondering why it says this here...”

He immediately flipped open the book to a certain page. When Marni looked at the part he was pointing at, she raised an eyebrow.

“Huh. That’s surprising. You’re actually asking a pretty good question.”

“A good question, you say...”

He wasn’t sure if that was a compliment. He thought it was, but just in case it wasn’t, he decided to keep his reply ambiguous.

“Okay, this is how you should think about it.”

She proceeded to answer his question in detail, tracing her finger along the text to guide his thinking and gesturing in the air for clarity and emphasis. For someone who was only going to listen, it was definitely above and beyond her proclaimed scope of duty. Considering she’d recommended the book, it was likely she’d read it herself as well. She displayed an insight into the topic that most certainly required a vast pool of knowledge to develop. Sain glanced at the countless books on the floor, wondering how many more she’d consumed.

The master of the library tower...

She might not have wished for the title, but she had certainly earned it.

“Okay, and about this spell... How should I channel my energy—”

“It’s too early for you to be learning this spell. You should start with something more basic.”

“But the basics can only take me so far, right? Won’t that limit the kinds of situations I can deal with?”

“Dark magic is very free-form, which gives it a lot of utility. Conversely, it also takes longer to learn each individual spell. It’s easy to get impatient, and that’s understandable. But when it comes to dark magic, as long as you learn it properly, even a single spell can be a very powerful weapon. Try to learn too many at once, and you might end up with a bunch of half-baked spells and nothing actually useful.”

“I see. Wise words. I’ll commit them to memory,” Sain said, nodding intently.

As a dark elf, Marni’s culture and upbringing naturally positioned her to be well-versed in dark magic. In fact, much of what she’d just explained was esoteric knowledge of a kind entirely absent from textbooks, and he’d hungrily consumed every piece of information she’d offered.

“What spells can you use?”

Sain grimaced.

“...It pains me to say this, but I can only use *Darku*.”

“You mean the beginner-level spell.”

“Yeah.”

“Which would put you in one of the lower grades, even for the junior division.”

“Hnngh...”

Sain could almost see the moment when Marni’s opinion of him changed from “pathetic” to “utterly pathetic.” Not that he could do anything about it, of course. It was the truth, after all.

“Wh-What spell should I learn next, then?”

“Are you going to make me do all the thinking? Figure that much out by yourself, at least.”

“Hrngh...”

Sain pursed his lips. Marni’s attitude suggested that she still didn’t trust him yet. He desperately wanted her to be his mentor, but they weren’t nearly on good enough terms for him to press her on the matter.

“...Oh, that reminds me. I have another question,” he said as he began flipping through the textbook again. “On this page, it talks about the versatility of dark magic, but—”

“Wait,” interrupted Marni as she stared at the place he’d flipped to, which was only a few pages away from the back cover. “How much of this book did you read?”

He looked up with a puzzled frown.

“All of it, of course.”

“...All of it? You read it from cover to cover in one night?”

“Yeah! I barely got any sleep!” he said with a proud grin, entirely unaware of the preposterousness of his claim.

Marni looked at the big, brick-like tome in his hand. It wasn’t the kind of thing one could read through in a single evening. She looked back at him. He didn’t seem to be lying, either. As she studied his expression, she discovered bags under his eyes that, in the dimness of the room, had previously escaped her

notice. Just then, footsteps echoed in the stairwell leading to the fifth floor.

“Sain? Marni? Are you two there?”

They heard Alicia calling to them, but from where they sat, they were too far from the stairs to see through the darkness.

“I’m over here. Miss Grim is with me too.”

“There they are.”

The reply came in the form of Melia’s voice. Both girls seemed to be present.

“I have to say, though...” said the maid as she approached them. “Master Sain really blends into the background here. It’s like he’s naturally camouflaged.”

“Hah hah, for the future dark knight, becoming one with the darkness is but a trivial matter.”

“Wow. I can hear him, but I can’t see him at all. Master Sain? Where are you?”

“I am here, my maid,” he said as he dramatically folded his arms.

She stopped right in front of him, turned in his direction, and looked around.

“Where are you, Master Sain?”

“I said I’m here.”

She narrowed her eyes and stared at him, her nose mere inches from his.

“Where?”

“Here.”

“Where?”

“Here!”

She shrugged.

“I only hear his voice. Maybe he lost his body, too. Let’s go look somewhere else.”

“Damn it, maid!” he yelled as he angrily flailed his arms.

Only then did Melia acknowledge his presence with an exaggerated,

“Ohhhhh, *there* you are.”

Alicia shook her head at the pair’s now-familiar slapstick and sighed.

“Marni, can we talk to you for a bit about the field exercises?”

“...Sure.”

Marni nodded and closed the book she was reading. Evidently, she was willing to cooperate as a teammate, at least.

“So, you’ve probably all heard, but the field exercises are both a survival test and a battle royale. Therefore, we need to have plans for dealing with both aspects of it. Let’s start with survival. Melia and I made a list of all the monsters that live in the forest. Here, this copy is yours, Marni.”

Marni took the piece of paper and nodded with a “Thanks.” Sain already knew the contents, having received his copy during lunch.

“In order to last the whole ten days, we’re going to need plans for fending off monsters and acquiring food. There are books about the monsters that we can look up, so as long as we’re strong enough and we know what we’re doing, I don’t think we’ll have much trouble with them. The problem... is the food. It looks like there are plenty of edible plant species in Trowa Forest, but there are just so many of them that it’s going to be hard to remember.”

Alicia scratched her head and frowned.

“I’ll handle the food,” said Marni. “Forests are a familiar environment for me, after all.”

“...Right. Dark elves used to live in forests, didn’t they?” mused Sain.

He’d wanted to meet the dark elves for a long time. Having conducted his own research before coming to Jenifa, he was aware that, even now, there was a strong preference for the forest amongst the dark elves. In terms of numbers, it was apparently an even split, meaning that there were lots of modern dark elves who still went deep into the forests to build their villages.

“I want to confirm something with you too, Alicia. Your magic isn’t just for show anymore, right?” asked Marni.

Seeing that her expression was serious, Alicia responded in kind.

“That’s right. I can fight now. Just like the rest of you.”

What she said was true. The reason Alicia’s magic used to be largely ineffectual was a complete lack of awareness with regard to the true nature of her power. The type of magic she wielded was known as holy fire. It was an extraordinary power, meant to accomplish only one end: purification. Due to its specialized purpose of purging all that was tainted or corrupt, only two types of creatures were normally susceptible to its effects. The first type — monsters. The second was considerably more unique — Chaos. However, the power of purification contained within holy fire was adjustable. By decreasing its purity, Alicia could employ it as regular fire magic. In the past, she wasn’t able to perform this kind of fine adjustment, mostly because she didn’t even know it existed. Now, she could control its effects at will, making her magic effective against humans, as well.

“Our team is looking pretty good in terms of firepower. I heard Miss Melia is pretty strong too, right?” said Marni, looking toward the maid.

“Oh, just drop the ‘miss.’ You can call me Melia. I’m surprised you know about me, though.”

“I heard from Sain. He said you’re his attendant, and that he’s proud of you.”

“Did he now? Mmm... I see, I see...”

Sain noticed Melia glancing at him, but when he looked back at her, she quickly turned away. He furrowed his brow. The maid seemed a little fidgety, and though it was too dark for him to be certain, he thought her ears were a shade pinker than he remembered. He wondered why.

“Which means the only useless one here is Sain.”

“Hnngh... Th-That’s... true, I guess,” he said, wilting under Marni’s chilly glare.

“Between fighting monsters to survive and fighting other students to win the battle royale... Yeah, she’s right. Under the current circumstances, you actually are useless, Sain,” said Alicia as she looked at the other two girls. “Granted, with the three of us, I think we’ve got our bases covered in terms of combat.”

Her confidence was well-deserved. While they couldn’t be sure if popular opinion agreed, their team was objectively a contender for first place. Melia’s

grades in school were exceptional, if not literally at the top of her class. Add to that Alicia's extensive repertoire of large-scale offensive magic — now with both bark and bite — that was especially effective against large numbers of opponents, along with Marni's mastery of dark magic, and they surely had a winning combination. Few students could hope to be their match.

"As for people we should watch out for... The Eldis twins come to mind," said Alicia.

"The Eldis twins?" Sain asked.

"The two oldest children of the Viscount Eldis. Same year as us but in another class. They were very good back when we were in the junior division, and I hear that their skills are still top-class in the intermediate division right now."

They were a pair of Loribanian nobility, which didn't ring any bells for Sain. It hadn't even been a month since he'd come to this kingdom, so the names of its nobility were completely beyond him.

"Miss Alicia, would the two of them happen to have red hair?"

"Yeah, they do. Do you know them?"

"I've traded a few spells with them during practical lessons."

"Ah... I feel for you. They're a pretty hot-headed pair, and they get really competitive whenever they see someone strong. The brother, Rayde, is the older one, and he's particularly aggressive. There was a time when he even went after the student council president."

The student council president, Cain Theresia, was a renowned figure in the academy. Sain had heard countless rumors about how his skills were peerless. Sain had, in fact, met the student council president once during his enrollment interview. The memory of the encounter caused him to shiver. He still remembered his eyes. They were focused, sharp, and almost a little feral, like those of an apex predator — a lion eyeing its prey. It took some serious confidence to challenge someone like that. The Eldis twins were definitely no pushovers.

"The twins are probably on the same team. I don't know who their other two members will be, though. We might have to go scout them out," said Alicia

before they heard the chime of a bell.

“Looks like it’s almost time for the library tower to close,” said Sain as he glanced at the clock near the ceiling.

“Sain, where’s your school bag?” asked Alicia.

“Huh? It’s... Ah! I forgot it in the classroom!”

“This is what happens when you dash off as soon as the bell rings,” she said with a sigh.

Sain leaped to his feet. The classrooms were going to be locked soon as well, so he had to hurry. As soon as he reached the stairwell, however, he suddenly remembered something and spun on his heels.

“Miss Grim,” he said as he ran back, “before I go, can you recommend me a book for today, as well?”

She immediately reached toward the bookshelf beside her and pulled out a book.

“...This is the follow-up to yesterday’s book. It’s more applied.”

“Awesome! Thanks!”

Sain smiled at her, but it only earned him a glare.

“...I highly recommend against sacrificing sleep for study time. It ruins your focus the next day and you don’t learn as much from class.”

“Hnngh... B-But, this is crucial for me right now. I need to learn dark magic, and I have no intention of stopping. As for classes... I’ll, uh, figure out how to make it work. Somehow.”

Sain grew a little flustered as he spoke. He hadn’t expected Marni’s icy gaze to be followed by words of concern. Meanwhile, Alicia gave him a flat look.

“Big words,” quipped Alicia, “for someone who spent most of today sleeping at his desk.”

“Okay, okay, I know.”

“Now, now, let’s cut Master Sain some slack. I don’t blame him for being so eager to learn from Miss Marni. After all, he’s been here for almost a month

and has made zero progress so far,” added Melia in her usual backhanded fashion.

Marni sighed.

“...You should also take your classes seriously. It’s better for you, in the long run, to make sure you’re getting enough sleep.”

“But...”

“If you can’t focus, you can’t use magic properly, either. Dark magic in particular works better when you grasp it through visualization and intuition instead of hard knowledge, so it’s very dependent on your state of mind.”

“...Fine. You’re right, Miss Grim. I’ll keep that in mind going forward.”

As a matter of fact, Sain had almost dozed off a couple of times already. He’d been trying his best to hide it, but he had to admit that, in his current state, he wasn’t going to be getting any useful reading done. Figuring that it really would be more prudent for him to get some sleep, he decided that after he retrieved his school bag, he’d take Marni’s advice and turn in early for the night.

After the sound of his footsteps disappeared down the stairwell, Alicia turned to Marni and smirked.

“Well, someone’s a lot more eager to help than I thought.”

“...I’m not teaching him because I want to. I’m just trying to get him to stop pestering me.”

“Sure you are. Besides, if you’re aiming for first place in the field exercises, then you might as well train him. The stronger your teammates, the better it is for you, right?”

“Not really. He’s so pathetically weak that we’d be better off if he just forfeited on day one.”

Alicia grimaced at her friend’s biting evaluation of Sain, but she could offer no reasonable rebuttal. In his current state, what Marni said was probably right. If Sain stopped holding back — if he could use his power as the holy knight to its full potential — he’d be stronger than everyone else in the academy. Normally, he should have been the object of respect and admiration, if not literal worship.

Instead, he had to suffer through derision and ridicule.

“Is he really darkkind?” asked Marni in a soft voice, almost to herself.

Both Alicia and Melia twitched a little at the question.

“Huh... Why do you ask?”

“It’s not like he’s not trying. It’s weird that he’s still an F,” she said as she contemplated her opinion of Sain out loud. “He seems motivated, and he’s not exactly stupid either. If he’s always been putting in work like that, he should absolutely be at least a D by now. Unless, I guess... he’s confused about his genus or something.”

The strange discrepancy between Sain’s attitude and competence led Marni to suspect that he was mistaken about his genus. The truth was, of course, that he was knowingly falsifying it, but her suspicion had merit. Magical assessment rankings could be continuously improved, so long as one put in the effort and had the proper aptitude. Sain seemed to be putting in the effort. It was reasonable, then, to assume that results should have followed.

“Yeah... Let’s just say he’s a special case. Circumstances, you know?” She gave an evasive answer before saying in a more somber tone, “I can tell you one thing for sure, though. When he says he’s trying to become the dark knight... he means it.”

Marni gave her an oblique look, but she said nothing in response.

Ten days after their first meeting, Sain was still making daily trips to the library tower after school, where he continued to pelt Marni with all sorts of questions about dark magic. He also made sure to sprinkle in a few head-to-ground “please take me as your apprentice” routines from time to time — just for good measure — but she never agreed to his request.

“Gah, it’s already this late? That’s it for today, I guess... I’ll come again tomorrow!”

“Please don’t.”

By now, it had become almost customary for Marni to voice her futile refusal and Sain to completely ignore her. Only after his hasty footsteps disappeared

down the stairs did Marni whisper softly to herself, "...I wish he'd just give up already."

While Sain and Marni both holed themselves up on the top floor of the library tower, reading until shortly before it closed, they left at different times. One time, Sain had proposed for them to head back to the dormitories together, but she'd turned him down, saying "I don't want anyone else to see me walking with you." Ever since then, Sain had departed alone once it was time to leave. At first, he'd seemed a little dejected, but recently, it no longer seemed to bother him. While he certainly carried himself like an attention-seeker, he didn't appear to be obtuse.

It wasn't that she didn't feel bad about it; she had a conscience, after all. She was well aware that Sain looked up to her, but she had to tread carefully around the issue of promising him anything. It wouldn't pay to be rash. One reason was simply that mentoring Sain seemed like a pain, and she didn't want to bother. More importantly, however, she was very conscious of the fact that she was a dark elf, and that was what most gave her pause.

She descended the stairs and exited the library tower. As soon as she walked outside, she heard people whispering about her as they passed her by. It was nothing new, of course.

"Hey, look, it's her... The dark elf."

"The master of the library tower or something? Creepy. Why can't she just stay in the tower, then?"

"Didn't someone say she's supposed to be confined there?"

"Wouldn't be surprised if she was. You know what they used to do, right? The dark elves? They used curses..."

"Geez, what are we doing, keeping potential murderers in the academy?"

Marni kept walking, the path back to her dormitory lined by suspicious gazes and pointed fingers. Jenifa students often stayed on campus until late at night, accompanied by their notes and texts. But even the most studious of learners gave her nasty looks when they saw her.

The three most distinctive features of dark elves were their silver hair, their

dark skin, and their long ears. In an attempt to hide these, Marni had kept herself hidden under a long hooded cloak. Her disguise, however, had long lost its purpose. She'd been spending most of her time on the top floor of the library tower since she was in the junior division, and it didn't take long for her to gain her nickname. The moniker spread quickly through the academy, and very soon, every last student was aware of her existence, along with her racial identity. By now, there was barely any point to hiding her face.

I can't afford to let them be seen... Not with someone like me.

For her, the promise of friendship came with a risk — anyone close to her might be forced to share in her suffering. Therefore, she distanced herself from other people and stayed in the library tower. Until recently, Alicia had been in a similar situation, so she'd allowed herself to chat with her from time to time. Now that Alicia was less isolated and having an easier time at school, maybe it was time for her to back off and start putting some distance between them.

She felt a pang of worry. Had someone seen them already? Was she too late? She hoped not.

If only she was here...

Marni thought of the only person she opened her heart to — her older sister, who'd been at her side for as long as she could remember, helping her through her troubles and shielding her from hostility.

Then, she shook her head.

Her sister wasn't at the academy anymore. She was alone here. The thought was sobering, but it hurt all the same. Just then, she heard the voice of a student who had just passed her.

"Speaking of which, I heard that dumbass also goes to the library tower pretty often these days."

She frowned. The mocking tone was familiar, but the content was not.

"Dumbass? Oh... You mean the Darkness Dork?"

"Yeah. How has a guy like that not been expelled yet? I'm telling you, this academy isn't what it used to be."

“Relax, man. He’ll be gone before you know it. You know he scored an F on the magical assessment, right?”

“Also, that *outfit*. Ugh. He’s embarrassing enough as is. I don’t get why he wants to embarrass himself more.”

“Probably because it’s the only thing he’s good at? Heh.”

Though his name was never mentioned, she was pretty sure they were talking about Sain. In a way, he sort of deserved it. His grades were abysmal and his appearance bordered on deviant. These were undeniable facts. Most people in his situation would at least keep their heads down. ‘Don’t talk the talk if you can’t walk the walk,’ so to speak. And yet, here he was, talking and walking with a flamboyant confidence that was shameless, baseless, and also entirely unflappable.

“...”

Their gibes left her conflicted. Clearly, they hated Sain, and they had good reason; everything from his academic performance to his aesthetic sense branded him as a fool — a fool who insisted on making his foolishness public, no less. Still, while they might know Sain the fool, they probably didn’t know Sain the man.

He’s isn’t that bad of a person, really.

Sain was a man of integrity. He had some glaring flaws, but he also possessed virtues that were worthy of respect and admiration. Unfortunately, the students mocking him were only aware of the former. If he feared the derision of other people, then he could have just kept a low profile. Surely, even he knew that a modest look and a mild demeanor would spare him plenty of animosity. Instead, he chose to do the opposite, donning ridiculously eye-catching clothes and ignoring all the criticism leveled against him as he pushed forward with unwavering tenacity toward his goal.

His mentorship request was the same. No matter how many times she turned him down, he’d be back again the next day with the same request — to make him her apprentice.

“Speaking of which, that weirdo’s at it again today.”

“You mean practicing his lousy magic?”

“Yeah, in one of the training gyms. I don’t know why he bothers. An F-ranker isn’t going to get any better with practice.”

Their voices faded behind her as they walked away into the distance.

“Training gyms...?”

For security reasons, the library tower always closed before it got dark, but the training gym should still be open right now. It occurred to Marni that she’d only ever seen Sain in the library tower; she had no idea what he did during the rest of the day. Since he’d always leave right before the tower closed, she’d assumed he’d simply gone back to the dormitory. Maybe she was wrong, though...

The sky had begun to darken, and most students had already returned to their rooms. She made her way down an empty hallway, at the end of which were the training gyms. Noticing that one of them still had its lights on, she quietly looked in from the entrance. Standing in the middle of the gym was Sain. The sweat dripping off his face had formed a small pool on the ground, and his shoulders rose and fell visibly with each ragged breath he took.

“Haaaa... Ugh... Damn it... This is tough,” he said, each word coming out as a grunt.

His usual black outfit had been discarded in favor of a lighter, more casual set of inners, which were completely soaked through. Marni watched him, speechless, wondering how long someone had to practice to end up in his current state. There was so much sweat on his face that it looked like he’d taken a shower. His breathing was extremely unsteady and came in uneven gasps. Every so often, one of his knees would give way, and he’d just barely manage to get the other foot under him to prevent a fall. On the ground nearby was a thick book — the very one Marni had recommended to him earlier today.

“I’ve got the image in my head. I just have to get a feel for it now, and I should be able to...”

He picked up the book and mumbled to himself as he riffled through the pages. Then, he placed it on the ground again and held one arm out in front of

him. Slowly, black particles began to coalesce in his palm. It was clearly some form of dark magic, but just before the spell took shape, the particles broke apart and dissipated. The attempt ended in failure.

“Damn! Again!”

Without even wiping the sweat on his cheeks, he began focusing his energy again. This time, it seemed to go more smoothly. The particles slowly melded together into a menacing sphere of black. Just before it became fully formed, however, the sphere suddenly ruptured.

“Wah?!” Sain yelped, causing Marni to jump as well.

Practicing magic was by no means a safe activity. A failed spell like the one just now could easily have led to injury. He was definitely lucky to have been unharmed. Despite such a close call, he immediately gathered himself and resumed his practice. After reading a few pages in the book again, he continued to attempt the spell, almost as if he’d already forgotten about the near-disastrous failure he’d experienced moments before. Ten minutes passed. Or was it twenty? Thirty? Maybe even an hour? Marni lost track of time as she watched him, half-entranced.

Magic wasn’t something that could be used indefinitely. Pulling magical energy from the atmosphere into one’s body and mentally shaping it into a spell was a physically draining process. Converting too much energy in a short amount of time could lead to fainting or even death. Though he was undoubtedly exhausted, both in mind and body, Sain nevertheless showed no signs of stopping. He didn’t even take breaks. There was something mesmerizing about his dogged — almost desperate — determination, and Marni found that she couldn’t look away. Suddenly, Alicia’s words resurfaced in her mind.

I can tell you one thing for sure, though. When he says he’s trying to become the dark knight... he means it.

She hadn’t believed it. The holy knight and dark knight were beings of legend. They were heroes. They were unmatched. They were the apotheosis of what they stood for. What they *weren’t* was something regular people became. The thought itself was comical. Had been. Should have been.

But now, faced with the sight of Sain, doubt crept into her mind.

Maybe... he really is trying to become the dark knight.

There was an intensity to his focus that defied all reason, and she simply couldn't bring herself to scoff at his efforts. A noise from down the hallway, however, pulled her out of her trance, and she quickly hid herself in the shadows and held her breath. Soon after, a girl appeared in the doorway, her black-hair and attendant uniform illuminated by the bright lights.

"How's it going, Master Sain?" asked Melia as she stepped into the gym. "I brought some water."

She handed Sain a towel as well, which he promptly used to wipe the sweat from his face. Then, he took the water bottle and, hoping to minimize any delays to his training, tried to drink its contents as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, he only managed two big gulps before he choked and began coughing violently.

"I'm glad you're willing to get some sleep now, but if you keep pushing yourself like this, you're going to collapse. Or worse."

"I know... But I feel like I'm starting to get the hang of it. I just need a little more time. I'm almost there," he said, handing the bottle and towel back to Melia. Then, he took a moment to calm his breathing before continuing. "Besides, Miss Grim said she wants to win first place at the field exercises... I can't afford to just be a burden for her. I need to get stronger. Fast."

As soon as Sain's words entered Marni's ears, she felt a sharp pang in her heart. Suddenly, she couldn't bear to watch him anymore. With soft steps, she left the training gym unnoticed. As soon as she got outside, she broke into a run. Her heart was racing. She wanted to believe it was due to her sprint.

I didn't know... I really didn't know... that he was trying so hard.

Judging from others' remarks and the fatigue she'd seen in him, he must have been practicing the same way every single day. She had no idea. Never would she have imagined that every day after their reading session in the library tower, he'd been running himself ragged with such grueling training sessions. However...

It's probably not enough.

His current method of training was a bad fit for his current level of skill. At this rate, it was unlikely that he could get good enough with a spell to be useful during the field exercises.

I can teach him, though.

As an expert in dark magic, she was acutely aware of what he was doing wrong. There were ways to improve his practice. That would, however, require her to spend time with him. To be *seen* with him. Dark elves were a race of beings that faced rampant discrimination. Anyone who was seen associating with them would be subject to the same treatment. All this time, she'd been keeping away from people because she didn't want to cause anyone else harm. But after witnessing a scene like that... She simply couldn't anymore.

She didn't have the heart to stand by and watch.

The next day, Sain came to the top floor of the library tower for his usual question-and-answer session.

"About the book you gave me yesterday, I can't seem to figure out the right image for this spell and—"

"Which page?"

"...Hm?"

Sain raised his eyebrows in surprise. Before he even finished his question, Marni was already leaning over and was examining the page he had open. Normally, she'd grumble at him before even glancing at him. Today, she seemed strangely cooperative. He shrugged. It was probably just him.

"I can get as far as converting the magical energy, but the activation afterward never works out. Every time, all the energy just scatters right before the spell activates. I feel like I'm controlling it properly, but..."

"Are you visualizing the whole process all the way through? Including the parts after the activation? Dark magic isn't going to work if you're only thinking about the final result. You have to visualize the process too."

"...Hmm?"

Her answer to his question was succinct and relevant. That was good, but he still frowned. For someone who was normally aloof and uncooperative, she was surprisingly willing to part with advice today. He looked at her, wondering what brought about the change of heart.

“What?” she asked curiously when she noticed him staring.

“Oh, uh... I was just thinking that you’re being very cooperative today.”

“Would you rather I weren’t?”

“N-No, of course not! I’m super glad that you are!”

“Then shut up and start studying,” she said, returning to her usual cold manner.

Sain scratched his head, confused by her sudden shift in attitude, but decided to follow her orders and read his book quietly.

For a while, neither of them said a word. Then, all of a sudden, Marni broke the silence.

“Sain,” she asked, turning towards him, “why are you trying to become the dark knight?”

His eyes glimmered as soon as he heard the question, and he immediately responded, “Why? Because the dark knight is the epitome of cool, of course!”

He raised his fist and struck a pose.

“The sable champion who vanquishes the wicked in a lonesome crusade against all forms of evil... Drawing from the infinite darkness that envelops him, he wields his ominous power with peerless mastery! He is the knight of knights! He is judge and executioner, the alpha and the omega! The black energy that pulses from his umbral soul strikes fear into all those in his path! He is despair incarnate, and he speaks to the hearts of every man and boy who has heard the calling of the darkness! Wrapped in the curses of his victims, their undying hatred clings to him like a cloak! The sheer weight of its burden defies all imagination! And yet, he continues to walk this dark road, for his scars are his glory, and his solitude his honor—”

In the middle of his passionate profession of love for the dark knight, he

suddenly paused. Marni was looking at him, and the solemn expression she wore suggested that she was not buying any of it. She was waiting to hear something, and it wasn't his usual spiel. She wanted to know the truth — the real reason he was trying to become the dark knight. He didn't know how she saw through his fib, but faced with her piercing gaze, he felt his own expression sobering as well. Eventually, he answered in a serious tone.

“I have a wish, and unless I become the dark knight, it will never become true.”

There was none of his usual flippancy. This time, he spoke from his heart.

“...I see.”

Marni looked down, seemingly grappling with his answer. After a while, she nodded and spoke again.

“Tomorrow, I'll start training you to apply what you've learned.”

Sain's eyes went wide at the announcement.

“After school, come to the courtyard behind the library tower. We'll train there in mock battles. You can put away the books; anything you don't know, I'll teach you,” she said before bells began chiming. “Looks like it's time to go. I need to prepare, so I'll leave first today. You... should focus on getting some rest tonight. You'll need it for tomorrow.”

With that, Marni turned and began walking toward the stairs.

“W-Wait! Miss Grim!” exclaimed Sain as he frantically waved at her. “Just... Just tell me one thing. How come you're suddenly willing to help me like this?”

She stopped. Turning her head just enough to give him a sideways glance, she curtly replied, “...Because I give up.”

“Huh?”

“I'm tired of saying no. You win.”

Sain gulped.

“D-Does that mean... You'll take me as your apprentice?”

“...I already said you win.”

There was a hint of embarrassment to the way she pouted and looked away. For a moment, Sain remained perfectly still, his eyes wide with disbelief. Then, he began to shake. First, it was his hands, followed by his arms, and finally his whole body.

“Ye—”

“Ye?”

“Yessssssss!” screamed Sain, throwing his fists up in the air in triumph.

He’d always known that becoming the dark knight was a lofty goal, and that sooner or later, he’d need to seek the wisdom of a talented mentor. To have the chance to apprentice himself to a dark elf — the race known for its mastery of dark magic — was a stroke of unbelievable fortune. Finally, he felt like he saw some light at the end of a long, long tunnel.

“Miss Grim!”

“Wh-What?”

“I promise that you will not regret making me your apprentice!” said Sain. His voice was brimming with excitement. At the same time, his eyes hardened with resolve. “Mark my words. I am going to become the dark knight! And you, Miss Grim... I’m going to make you the dark knight’s mentor!”

His dream was still ridiculous, but after seeing how much work he’d been putting in last night, Marni knew that, while it was ridiculous, it did not deserve ridicule.

“I’m looking forward to it,” she said with a smile.

“I won’t let you down!” replied Sain, confidently thumping his chest.

Thus, in a dim alcove of the top floor of the library tower, a new mentorship was born, twenty days before the beginning of the field exercises.

The day after Sain’s apprenticeship under Marni began, he did as he had been instructed and made his way to the courtyard behind the library tower as soon as school ended.

“You’re late.”

Upon arriving in the courtyard, he found that his new mentor was already present. She glowered at him.

“Absolutely unacceptable. The apprentice can’t be arriving after the mentor.”

“S-Sorry. I’ll make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

After the last homeroom period concluded, he’d spent some time explaining to Alicia and Melia how he was going to be under Marni’s tutelage starting today. As a result, he’d ended up a bit late. Seeing that he’d apologized, though, Marni did not scold him any further.

“First, I want to see your current skill level,” she said, her gray cloak fluttering in the wind.

“Right now, the only spell I can activate properly is *Darku*... Should I show you right here?”

She shook her head.

“I said I’m going to train you using mock battles. If an F-ranker like you wants to be useful in the field exercises, you’ll have to get better *fast*. The only way to do that is to cram — have you do as much as possible in as short a time as possible.”

“What should I do, then?”

“You’re going to fight me, and you’re going to use your magic to do it.”

Sain gaped in surprise, but Marni ignored him and continued her explanation.

“Dark magic is special in that it’s not something we have an intuitive understanding of. Unlike fire or water, we don’t normally *wield* darkness. In order to use such a vague and ill-defined power, what you need isn’t knowledge but a mental image... It’s not about knowing it. It’s about *thinking* it. *Feeling* it. I’ve told you this before, right?”

Sain nodded.

“During a battle, your emotions will flare up, which often ruins any complex mental constructs. Therefore, the correct usage of dark magic requires that the user always remain calm, no matter the circumstances.”

“I see... So I should start by making sure I can stay calm.”

“That’s right,” said Marni with a nod. “The first principle of dark magic: The unpracticed mind knows no composure.”

She pointed at him.

“Repeat,” she said with a voice of cool command.

Sain immediately straightened himself and repeated.

“Th-The unpracticed mind knows no composure.”

“Louder.”

“The unpracticed mind knows no composure!”

“Good.”



Sain watched her fold her arms and give a slow but satisfactory nod.

Huh. She's really into this.

It was a sight that he was glad to see. Back when she first agreed to join their team for the field exercises, he'd been worried that it was a reluctant decision on her part. Fortunately, she was now taking up her role enthusiastically.

"Ah, so that's how it is... I see now, Miss Grim. That cold, indifferent attitude of yours is simply a manifestation of your adherence to this principle!"

"No, that's just me."

"Oh. Uh..." Realizing he'd just made a terrible faux pas, Sain fumbled for words. "R-Right. Of course. That's just you."

There was a long, awkward silence.

"...I know I'm gloomy and depressing to be around. You don't have to rub it in my face."

"That's not it! That's totally not what I meant!"

Sain panicked as Marni grew visibly disheartened. He did note, however, that compared to when they'd first met, she was far more expressive with her emotions now.

"Anyway, it's time for the mock battle. Get ready," she said.

"O-Okay."

He took off his black coat. Underneath, he was wearing his academy-issued gym clothes. Marni did the same, removing her gray cloak to reveal the same set of gym clothes. Unlike the dim interiors of the library tower's top floor, there was ample lighting outside. With her cloak gone, this was the first time Sain actually got a good look at Marni. Her long hair was pulled back into a single bundle for ease of movement. Sunlight danced off its silver strands, accentuating her dark skin. Though her limbs were a little on the slender side, they were balanced by the sporty vibe of her outfit.

"What?" she asked with a frown.

Only then did Sain realize he'd been staring.

“Uh, I was just thinking... You’ve always got that big cloak draped over you, so it’s sort of refreshing to see you in lighter attire. Is this what you meant yesterday when you said you needed to prepare?”

“Mmhm. This outfit was covered in dust, so I had to wash it.”

The academy-issued gym clothes were meant to be worn during practical lessons, but Jenifa did not impose a dress code upon its students. In general, students were free to wear whatever they wanted. In Marni’s case, it seemed likely that she even went to the practical lessons in the same clothes she wore in the library tower, gray cloak and all. Her gym clothes probably saw very little use.

“...Do I look weird?”

“N-No, not at all!”

He was definitely not going to tell her that she looked like a junior division student.

“Let’s get started, then... Get ready.”

Marni pursed her tiny little lips and exhaled. In response, Sain readied himself to fight. Mock though it may have been, it was still a battle. Being unarmed, he brought his hands up in a defensive stance, bent his knees, and prepared himself to react to whatever she— “Darku!”

“Whoa?!”

The battle began immediately. A mystical bullet of pure darkness shot through the air at him. It was so sudden that he just barely managed to get out of the way of the black sphere.

“You can attack me with your spells whenever you want. The only rule is that they have to be dark magic spells.”

“G-Got it!”

He hadn’t even finished answering before she launched another *Darku* at him. Soon, he found himself dodging an endless flurry of black missiles. As soon as he evaded one, the next was already flying toward him. It took all his concentration just to avoid being hit.

Whenever I want, she says... Seems a little impossible when I'm being showered with bullets.

She gave him no openings whatsoever. Her shots approached him with a speed that seemed tailored to his abilities. They were just slow enough for him to dodge, but whenever he tried to cast his own, they'd increase in velocity and density, forcing him to cancel his attempt.

All right. I'm already learning things. There's no way for me to attack with a spell if my opponent figures out my attack timing.

This kind of constant, high-intensity, split-second decision-making was indeed reminiscent of real battles. If he wanted to make any progress, he'd have to be able to compose himself even under extreme circumstances like these.

"Darku Shot!"

The magical equivalent of buckshot came flying toward him.

"Wha—?!"

He turned to see a swarm of oncoming pellets that filled his entire view. Only a last-second leap backwards spared him the experience of being on the receiving end of a magical shotgun.

"Huh. I didn't think you'd manage to dodge that."

"H-Heh... Heh... I can't have you underestimating me, after all."

He intended it as a bluff, but Marni paused for a moment and nodded before saying, "Okay. Then let's up the ante."

She held out her palm.

"Orb of gloom, devour with shadow and darkness — Dardia!"

A floating black sphere materialized and flew toward him. There was a sense of weight to it that was far beyond the previous pellets of *Darku*. This thing had *substance*, and it didn't seem like he'd survive a direct hit with his consciousness intact.

"Wh-Whoaaaaa!"

He leaped backwards, and the orb passed in front of him, only for another

one to approach from the front. He ducked to avoid losing his head, bending so low that his forehead almost touched the ground, and held out his own hand.

“Now! *Darku!*”

His own missile of darkness shot toward Marni, but it paled in comparison to hers. Slower and smaller, it was quickly intercepted by a stronger counterpart.

“That was pathetic.”

It wasn't just that Sain was weak; Marni was also exceptionally strong. Both of them had cast the same spell. *Darku* was a beginner-level spell, usable even by the lower years of the junior division. In her hands, however, it had enough power and precision to be a threat to even experienced fighters. Though he'd always known that dark elves were masters of dark magic, the experience of seeing it first-hand was something else entirely.

“*Great torrent of darkness, drown the land in seas of black...*”

While continuing to fire off her missile barrage, Marni simultaneously began to recite an incantation. It was the spell she'd used when they'd first met. With its large area of effect, it was capable of annihilating a multitude of enemies. Against a single foe like him, it'd be more than overkill.

“*Velle Darku!*”

A raging wave of darkness swept toward him.

“W-Waaaaaaaah!”

Faced with a veritable tsunami of magical energy, Sain did the only thing that was reasonable — he turned tail and ran for his life. In his current state, he had no way of defending himself against such a massive spell. Marni probably had held back, but even then, getting hit by that was probably going to result in a trip to the infirmary.

“Hnnnghaaah!”

With an awkward grunt, he lunged forward, landing in a roll. The black wave came within inches of his rear before waning away like the tide. It was his chance to counterattack.

“*Darku!*”

Without bothering to even get to his feet, Sain whipped out his arm and launched a spell, only for Marni to shoot it down again with her own.

“Nope. Not even close.” She sighed. “It’s not even about the way you activate the spell or stuff like that... You fundamentally don’t understand the nature of dark magic.”

“The nature... of dark magic?”

She nodded.

“You’re not taking dark magic seriously.”

Her words hit him like a sledgehammer.

“That can’t be... You think *I’m* not taking dark magic seriously?!”

He practically worshiped the darkness. For a true believer like him, her evaluation was downright humiliating.

“You aren’t. So I’m adding another component to your training curriculum. Tonight, meet me in front of the main gate of the school at ten.”

“Ten at night? Wait, what about curfew?”

“Sneak out,” she said, as if it were the most natural thing possible.

Sain stared at her in speechless astonishment. It suddenly occurred to him that Marni was a girl who’d carried out what was essentially an unauthorized takeover of the library tower’s top floor. It wasn’t as if she’d asked for permission. She’d decided to turn it into her own private space simply because there wasn’t a whole lot of traffic up there. While she might look like a docile person from the outside, she was not afraid to act.

“Miss Grim, you’re, uh... more *liberal-minded* than I thought.”

“You just realized?”

She showed him a grin that seemed to say, *It’s too late now.*

“Also,” she continued, “this is sort of unrelated to dark magic... but do you have any martial arts experience? Or combat training?”

“Hm? No, not really. Why?”

“...Don’t worry about it, then. I was just curious because you move pretty well for someone whose magical assessment was F and whose physical assessment was E.”

She studied him for a while before ostensibly reaching some sort of conclusion and turning away, leaving Sain scratching his head in puzzlement.

Half an hour before their scheduled meet-up time, Sain left his room. The dormitories of Jenifa Royal Magic Academy had a nine o’clock curfew, at which point multiple housemothers would begin making the rounds and checking the rooms one by one. The meticulousness of it all — curfews and patrolling housemothers and whatnot — was purely in service to the many nobles whose children attended the academy. Even with royal backing, having a son or daughter of the nobility get kidnapped would leave the academy in a very precarious position. In order to avoid such a predicament, Jenifa paid a great deal of attention to its security. Any students found violating the curfew — nobility or not — would be sent straight to the scolding room.

Time for some stealth. I can’t afford to get caught.

He checked the hallway. It was empty. The housemothers had just finished their room checks half an hour ago. Right now, their guard was probably down. He took one sneaky step forward and— “Where are you going?”

“Gyaaaah?! Son of a— Damn it, maid!”

Melia suddenly appeared beside him.

“You know... I’d like to point out that it’s very rude of you to call me a son, and even ruder to call me the word that was coming after it.”

“Uh, well, that’s... Sorry. I didn’t mean to say that...”

“In fact, I feel rather hurt right now.”

“I-I’m sorry.”

While she was a bit more expressive than Marni, Melia also tended to keep her feelings private. It was, therefore, rare to see her display any visible sorrow. Her expression right now, however, looked undoubtedly sad.

“So, well? Where are you going?” she asked again.

A number of excuses flashed across his mind, but in the end, he decided to come clean with her.

“Miss Grim is giving me a crash course in dark magic. She told me to meet her at the front gate.”

“...Now? Do you realize what time it is?”

“Yeah, she didn’t tell me what’s going to happen, but it’s her. Whatever she’s going to do, it’ll probably be useful for me.”

Melia scowled a little at him.

“Well, somebody sure trusts her a lot.”

“Of course. The first thing an apprentice should do is trust his mentor.” He frowned. “What’s that look for?”

Melia continued to fix him with a narrow-eyed glare for a while before turning away with a pout.

“Nothing.” There was a hint of resentment in her voice. “So? How are you going to sneak out?”

“Yeah, about that... Sorry, but can you help me get out of here?”

“Fine. I know of a couple of back doors. I can bring you there.”

“Excellent. I knew I could count on you, my maid. By the way, how come you know where the back doors are?”

“Contingency plans.”

She proceeded to lead him to a rear exit. They walked past a few people while traversing the hallways, but no one took issue with them. The curfew didn’t forbid students from leaving their rooms; it was only the building’s entrance that was locked. Muffled laughter could be heard from some of the doors they passed, suggesting there were still plenty of students gathered in their friends’ rooms. Soon, however, the path they took grew more and more quiet, and the presence of others faded away.

“Keep going straight from here and you’ll find a metal door that leads outside.”

“All right. Thanks for your help, my maid.”

“Just doing my job. When you’re back, just give me a signal. Throw a stone at my window or something, and I’ll come here again to let you in.”

“Got it.”

It seemed like the back door he was about to use could only be opened from the inside. Luckily for him, Melia’s room faced the main street, and it was possible to signal to her when he returned from the outside.

“I have to say, though... A sneaky meeting between a boy and a girl at this time of the night...” she murmured as he was about to go.

“Yeah, to the uninformed, it probably looks like we’re going on a secret date.”

“*Excuse* me?”

“Yeep! Wh-Why are you glaring at me like that?! It was a joke! A joke!”

“Was it? Because it sure didn’t sound like one.” She kept glaring. “Just so you know, I’m letting you out because you said she’s giving you a crash course. If you do *anything else* with her, I’m going to be rather upset.”



“O-Okay.”

Figuring it was in his best interest to avoid getting on her nerves right now, Sain committed to nodding his head at everything she said. Then, he fled the scene, feeling Melia’s menacing gaze on his back the entire time, as he quickly made his way down the hallway and out the metal door. Beside him, a few potted plants sat unused. There were a few empty wooden crates, as well. The space seemed to be some sort of storage room. From there, he made his way onto the main street of the academy town and headed toward the academy.

Upon arriving at the academy’s main gate, he found that Marni was still nowhere to be seen.

“Phew... Looks like I managed to get here first this time.”

After a brief wait, she appeared.

“I’m here. Did you have any trouble getting out?”

“No, it went smoothly. Speaking of which, how did you get out, Miss Grim?”

“What do you mean? I just used the back door.”

Apparently, they’d used the same method to sneak out. Though they lived in different dormitory buildings, he’d heard that the buildings all had a very similar layout. It wasn’t much of a stretch to assume Marni’s dormitory had the same kind of back door he’d employed.

“Anyway, let’s go. I’ll show you how to get there. Follow me.”

Rather than enter the school, she instead began walking along the fence that surrounded the campus.

“We’re not going inside?”

“No, we’re heading for the east town gate.”

“East town gate? We’re leaving the town?”

“Yes.”

At the bottom of a gentle slope, they came to the east gate, which was one of the few points of entry and exit through the wall that encircled the town. The gate guards gave them strange looks when they walked through, but no one

made an attempt to stop them. After another ten minutes of walking, they came to a small forest.

“Where are we?”

“This is where they grow the plants used in magic herbology class. It’s outside the town wall, but it still technically belongs to the academy, so it shouldn’t be too much of a problem if we go in without permission... Probably.”

Despite the somewhat concerning amount of uncertainty in her statement, she casually strode into the forest, and Sain followed behind her. At first, he could still catch some glimpses of the outside scenery, but soon it was dense forest on all sides. He looked around at the abundant nature surrounding them. It was a tranquil atmosphere, but there was also an eerie sense of isolation from the world at large.

“I-It gets pretty dark in here— Gah!”

Unlike in town, the forest did not have the convenience of street lamps. With his attention focused purely on trying to keep up with Marni, he ended up tripping on a rock underfoot.

“...Here should be fine,” murmured Marni as her steps came to a halt. “Look. Can you see those little monsters up in the trees?”

“Hm?”

Sain looked in the direction Marni was pointing in. His eyes had yet to adjust to the darkness, and he couldn’t even make out the trees themselves, never mind any monsters on them. Only after a long period of staring did he slowly begin to see some tiny forms on the branches.

“...Okay, I see them. They look like monkeys.”

Perched on the trees were tiny little monsters that resembled skinny monkeys. They seemed to be nocturnal, judging by the fact that they were still active at this hour. Their little heads warily turned this way and that, watching for potential enemies, and their long, thin tails dangled downwards, swaying from side to side.

“They’re called night monkeys,” said Marni. “Obviously nocturnal. They’re

timid little monsters, but they eat medicinal herbs, so the academy's teachers have to visit regularly to exterminate them."

"...They don't seem very exterminated," said Sain as he looked at the numerous little creatures occupying the treetops.

"It's not the season for magic herbology right now, so nobody's bothering with them," she answered matter-of-factly. "Starting today, it'll be your job to get rid of them. Every night, you're going to come here and start exterminating. No weapons, though. You have to take them down with dark magic only. If you get too spellsick, feel free to stop and go home."

"So, I just have to knock them out? That's it?"

"That's it." She glanced at him, paused, then added, "You probably want to know why you're doing this. I expect you to figure that out on your own."

Sain frowned and scratched his head. It looked like he had some thinking to do.

"There's no point for both of us to be here, so I'll be heading back to the dorm. I came with you today to show you how to get here, but starting tomorrow, you'll be coming here by yourself."

"All right, understood. Thanks for coming today. If you don't mind me asking, though... How long should I do this for?"

Marni contemplated the question in silence for a while before answering, "Until you feel it's enough."

Then, she spun on her heels and walked away. With his sole companion gone, the forest felt quieter and even more eerie than before. Wind rustled the branches, providing a faint, scratchy ambience that was punctuated by the percussive noises of night monkeys leaping deftly from branch to branch. He took a deep breath, looked up at the creatures, and put on a bold smile.

"Hah, she needs to give me a little credit."

For Sain, who was actually lightkind, learning dark magic was extremely difficult. After a month of schooling, however, his efforts were starting to pay some dividends. While he couldn't even activate *Darku* properly before, it was

now a spell that he could cast reliably.

With monsters like these, I should be able to make short work of them.

The night monkeys looked agile but not particularly tough. Even a beginner-level spell should knock them out with a direct hit. He calmly held his hand out toward one of the monsters and began casting the spell.

“Darku!”

Dark energy gathered into the shape of a bullet in his palm and shot toward his target, who...

“Kikiii!”

...leaped away with ease and squealed in his direction.

“Hnnngh. Speedy little things. Again, then!”

He’d known they were fast, so he quickly followed up his first shot with a second. Once again, his missile of darkness flew toward the monster, and once again, it jumped out of the way.

“...Huh.”

It had dodged his attack so easily. And twice in a row, to boot. Suddenly, it occurred to him that maybe Marni gave him exactly as much credit as he deserved. His prior confidence tempered by the realization, he pursed his lips and fired off two more shots at the squealing creature. Neither found their mark.

“...Okay, so this is harder than I thought. Time for a new approach.”

It didn’t seem like he was going to make any progress just firing shots into the dark, so he decided to change his strategy. He began walking further into the forest, keeping his steps slow and silent. Soon, he found a night monkey that hadn’t noticed his approach.

It can’t possibly dodge an attack from its blind spot.

Carefully, he circled around the tree it was perched on and placed himself directly behind it.

“Darku!”

He launched the shadowy missile at the back of the creature's head. It remained oblivious of its impending doom, all the way up until the spell came within an inch of striking. Then...

"Kiii!"

Without even looking backwards, it jerked its head away, allowing the spell to fly harmlessly past it.

"Wha—?!"

Questions filled his mind. It had dodged an attack from its blind spot. *Without even looking*. How? He had no answer, nor was he allowed much time to ponder. A small shadow pounced at him from the trees to his right.

"Nuuaaugh!"

Another one of the creatures had gotten close without him noticing. He felt it swipe its sharp claw across the back of his hand. His shriek of pain was accompanied by a burst of noise in the treetops. Branches and leaves all around him began rustling, and he soon found himself surrounded by the squealing monsters.

"U-Uh oh!"

The scene of a small legion of night monkeys leaping out of the trees and descending upon one hapless victim was quite something to see. Sadly, the only audience was the victim himself. They assaulted him with their short, narrow claws and tiny teeth, digging and scratching and biting at his skin. Fortunately for him, each individual night monkey wasn't capable of doing much damage. There were a lot of them though, and while he wasn't in any grave danger, it sure hurt like hell.

"Ow ow ow ow! Damn it, sto— Gah!"

They gnawed on his neck and pulled at his cheeks. He screamed and flailed his arms, trying to shake them off. Unfortunately for him, while night monkeys were usually timid, once they became hostile, they *stayed* hostile. Even if he knocked one off, another would immediately take its place. He considered fleeing, but with his vision severely hampered by the darkness, he wasn't even sure if he could get away safely.

“D-Damn it! *Darku! Darkuuu!*” he screamed, frantically firing shot after shot into the shadows darting around in the darkness. None of them landed.

They were all over him now. He thrashed about blindly, writhing from the sharp jolts of pain all over his body. Something — a monkey, probably — got under his foot, and he stumbled to the ground. He quickly pushed himself back up before the creatures could bury him under their combined weight. Not five steps later, he tripped again. It could have been another monkey, but honestly, at this point, it could have been his own other foot for all he knew. He was too disoriented to tell.

By the time he hobbled out of the forest, he was covered in scrapes and bruises and feeling very much like he was about to cry.

After school the next day, Sain and Marni stood facing each other behind the library tower again.

“Judging by how you look, I assume last night didn’t go very well,” she said, studying him.

“...No, it didn’t.”

She was wearing gym clothes. As for him... If the verb “wear” is defined by the total volume of fabric on the body, then he was definitely wearing bandages. His stamina had yet to recover, and he looked absolutely exhausted.

“How many did you take down?”

“...Not even one.”

“I figured.”

Her response suggested that she’d expected him to fail miserably last night.

“We’re going to keep doing the mock battles after school. It’s necessary to build your battle sense. The thing is, we need to move on to applying the things you learned in more realistic situations, but we can’t do that until you finish your nighttime training, so hurry up with that.”

“...I’ll do what I can.”

His usual baseless confidence was nowhere to be seen. Last night’s results were too depressing for him to make light of. Nevertheless, he still had a mock

battle to contend with, so he forced himself to focus on the task at hand — being brutally abused by Marni. Sain's skills were unchanged from yesterday, so the results of the mock battle were similarly unchanged. After taking a terrible beating, Marni held her hand up and said, "That's it for the training after school... Don't forget about your nighttime regimen."

"Okay... I... Got... it..." answered Sain, his breaths coming in long, exhausted gasps.

As he shuffled away, he almost slipped on a puddle. It wasn't raining, though. That was just his sweat.

A few days passed, and Sain was still unable to hit any of the night monkeys.

"Damn! Why? Why can't I hit them..."

The thick beads of sweat rolling down his forehead were not from the exhaustion of spellsickness, but a rising sense of panic at his own lack of results.

"If I can just... predict how they're going to move..."

During a short break, he studied the movements of the tiny monsters. Each of them had a tail, which they used along with their long, skinny legs to scamper about the treetops. As he carefully followed them with his eyes, a thought came to him. Up until now, he'd been waiting for them to stop moving and aiming at them when they were still. Maybe they'd have a harder time dodging if he cast the spell right after they moved.

"Darku!"

He launched a shot at a nearby monkey just when it was about to leap to a tree in front of him. However agile they were, they couldn't possibly alter their course once they were airborne. The monster had already made its leap, and his aim was true. This was it! He had it! Right when his projectile was about to make contact, the night monkey hooked its tail around a branch above its head and made a sharp upward turn in the air.

"Kikikiii!"

"Hnnnngh..."

Sain let out a frustrated groan. His new hypothesis had been immediately

refuted. He kept firing off more shots, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't even put a scratch on them.

"Is this... not what I'm meant to be doing?"

He'd tried all sorts of methods over the past few days, but his trial-and-error approach had produced absolutely no results. He was no closer to hitting them than he had been on day one. At this point, he couldn't help but wonder if he was misunderstanding something crucial — if he'd gotten something wrong from the start.

"Is my problem... deeper down?"

He remembered how Marni had said that he fundamentally didn't understand the nature of dark magic. Something didn't feel right. It was as if the very first step he'd taken had been in the wrong direction.

"Well, someone seems like they're stuck."

Surprised to hear a voice behind him, he turned to find Marni walking in his direction.

"M-Miss Grim. What are you doing here?"

"It looked like you were having more trouble than I'd expected, so I came to give you a hint."

"A hint?"

"Yes, a hint. Just this once, I'm going to show you how it's done," she said, stopping beside him.

Her words were a profound source of relief for Sain, who'd been growing increasingly doubtful of the feasibility of the exercise. He wasn't sure if it was even possible to complete. Seeing it done would at least put his suspicions to rest.

A branch rustled overhead as a night monkey leaped onto it.

"Watch carefully," she said as she turned her palm toward the monster above them.

He closely observed her every movement, taking care to avoid even a single

blink lest he missed something. Dark magical energy coalesced in her palm. She was probably going to cast *Darku* — the same spell he'd been using. It didn't seem like she was doing any sort of special aiming. She simply held her arm out straight at her target. There was nothing remarkable about her process so far.

The night monkey regarded her outstretched palm with a blank look. It didn't seem to comprehend what she was doing. She took aim at its head and let the spell fly. The black missile shot forward... and slammed into the monster's face.

“Wha—?!”

Both Sain and the monkey let out a yelp of surprise. The monkey fell out of the tree, landed on the ground with a thud, and stopped moving. Sain followed its fall with his eyes, stared at its form on the ground, and stopped moving as well. His mind was as blank as the monkey's face had been.

“Wh-Why? How?”

To Sain's eyes, Marni hadn't done anything strange. There was no special skill or night monkey-specific method. She'd simply cast the spell like normal — the way she always did during their mock battles.

“All right, see you later. Keep trying.”

And with that, Marni left.

The next day during lunch break, while his classmates were eating and chatting with friends, Sain remained motionless in his seat, face in arms and arms on desk.

“He looks more miserable by the day.”

“I knew it wasn't going to be easy for him, but...”

Alicia and Melia wore concerned frowns as they discussed his recent behavior. He wasn't sleeping; he was just dejected.

In the end, I still couldn't do it.

Even after Marni went all the way there to give him a personal demonstration, he had failed to take advantage of the opportunity. Her method remained a mystery to him, and he was unable to replicate her success. To this day, he still had yet to land a single hit on the night monkeys.

“Hey, Sain, aren’t you going a little overboard these days? You keep skipping your lunch, too... If you keep this up, you’re going to fall apart pretty soon.”

“...Fair point. I guess I do need to eat lunch, at least,” he replied in a tone that sounded a tad too obligatory for a fundamental element of everyday life.

The two girls looked at each other, their frowns deepening.

“What kind of training are you doing right now?” asked Melia.

“Training? Right, training...”

Sain slowly pushed himself up and shambled his way toward the cafeteria. They followed him, listening to him recount the events of the past few days. They’d already known about his mock battles after school, so he mostly spoke of his nighttime regimen. He earned himself a reproving glare from Alicia when he got to the part about sneaking out of the dorm at night, but after some convincing, she agreed to let the matter slide.

“A training regimen that involves fighting monsters in the dark, huh... You’re right in that it seems like it’s about more than just fighting them. If she just wanted you to take down some monsters, there are loads of better opponents than night monkeys.”

“Maybe, but it doesn’t even matter right now. The problem is that I can’t land a single hit on them with my spells. Day after day... I just keep trying... and failing. There’s no progress made. I’ve been running in circles for so long that at this point, I’m not even sure if I’ll ever manage to hit them.”

“Wow, self-doubt? From Master Sain? That’s...” Melia was about to deliver a scathing quip in her usual fashion, but the look of utter defeat on his face made her reconsider. Her expression grew softer, and she said with honest concern, “That’s actually a little worrying. But there has to be a way, right? I mean, didn’t Marni manage to do it?”

“...She did.”

He nodded as he recalled her demonstration last night.

“I think the way I’m using magic might be fundamentally wrong somehow, like there’s some crucial piece of the puzzle I’m just missing. I should be casting

the same spell as Miss Grim, but the results are incomparable. Hers is so much stronger, while mine... It's like... it lacks substance or something," he said, his voice dropping to a low murmur toward the end as he fumbled for words to describe the vague sense of incongruity he felt.

"Huh... It almost sounds like you're struggling with the same problem I had," said Alicia in a low, pensive murmur.

His eyes widened. Her words were like a clap of thunder in his mind. He stared at her, but she was too busy sorting through her own thoughts to notice.

"Like, you know how I couldn't use any light magic before?" She continued. "Until I met the two of you, I just couldn't do it. And the stuff that I *could* use, I mean, it *looked* like fire magic, and it was burning and everything, but you touch it and it's barely even warm... It was literally... just for show. And I kept trying to figure out how to make my magic, you know, not for show, and in the process of thinking so much about it, I started to wonder about the nature of magic and what its substance was, just like you're doing right now."

She spoke in a very casual tone. To her, this was simply idle banter between friends. To Sain, it was his missing puzzle piece.

"Magic that's... just for show... I see. So that's why..."

He thought back to his training over the past few days, replaying each failed attempt in his mind. There was something they all shared — the one common thread that linked all of them — that was probably the cause for their failure. He had to make sure. He needed to *test* his theory. After countless days of soul-crushing despair, it felt like he finally found the breakthrough he needed to reach new heights.

"Hnnaugh?! S-Sain? What're you—" yelled Alicia as Sain grabbed her hands and shook them. He was grinning from ear to ear.



“Thank you, Miss Gold! That’s it! You figured it out!”

“Wh-Wh-What?! What are you talking about?!”

“The answer I’ve been looking for! You figured out what it is that I’m missing! Thank you! I owe you big for this! Rest assured that this debt shall be repaid!”

He shook her hands some more, which only caused her already reddened cheeks to flush even more. Flustered and confused, she could do little but watch as Sain dashed off. His destination was clear — the library tower.

He needed to speak to Marni.

That day, after classes ended, Sain went early to the night monkeys’ forest.

“As I thought. This place is pretty dark even before the sun’s completely down.”

During lunch break, after hearing what Alicia said, he’d gone straight to Marni. He’d found her on the top floor of the library tower, book in hand as always. Upon approaching, he immediately asked if he could cancel the mock battle today. The reason he gave was “because there’s something I want to test right away.”

He collected himself. This chance had come at the cost of throwing a wrench into Marni’s schedule. He needed to make it count.

“First, let’s try the usual.”

He took aim at a night monkey that was walking along a branch and sent a *Darku* at it. The monster dodged it with ease.

“...As I thought.”

All this time, he hadn’t had the slightest clue why they evaded his attacks so easily. Now, he knew. With his eyes closed, he replayed Marni’s demonstration in his mind. It was the same *Darku* spell, but it was incomparably stronger and faster than his. Even in darkness like this, it had hit the night monkey with perfect accuracy. The crucial part, however, was neither its strength nor its speed.

I thought I was just tired or something, but no. My eyes weren’t playing tricks

on me.

He remembered that he hadn't been able to see her spell very well. It was definitely there, and it was definitely *Darku*, but he hadn't gotten a very clear look at it, almost as if he couldn't follow it with his eyes, despite having kept them peeled for so long they'd started to hurt. At the time, he'd figured that it was probably just too fast, but no, that wasn't it.

It was camouflaged.

Marni's *Darku* had blended into the surrounding darkness.

"Her magic replicated the darkness. It was a part of it. Hm, so that's what true dark magic is like..."

After spending so many nights in the forest with the night monkeys, he was becoming very familiar with their traits and habits. Being nocturnal, they could see well in the dark. Furthermore, they probably didn't even need their eyes to detect the presence of people or magical energy around them. Their acute senses were likely what allowed them to dodge attacks from their blind spots. Marni's spell, meanwhile, had an essence that was very similar to true darkness. That was why hers had been successful. It had blended into the darkness, which caused it to be hidden from the night monkey's senses — both visual and otherwise. Sain himself had had trouble seeing it.

"For show, huh... Looks like she hit the nail on the head. My dark magic just looked dark. It was black on the outside, but inside, it was just a clump of magical energy..."

Again, he remembered what Marni had said to him when he'd begun his training.

You fundamentally don't understand the nature of dark magic.

In other words, his magic had been incomplete.

The answer was right there. It had been staring me in the face this whole time.

The eerie darkness that covered this forest made it the perfect place for him to practice. Whatever he was missing, he'd find it here in the environment itself. After all, this forest was home to true darkness.

Concentrate.

Magic was a power created by the gods. The goddess Vicitaelia gave birth to light magic, while her male counterpart, Shartegallia, gave birth to dark magic. During their creation, the essence of both forms of magic had been vaguely defined by their respective creators. When humans used magic, they had to visualize the magic's essence in their mind. The closer the image was to the true definition, the stronger the magic would be. Having been created by the gods, these definitions were absolute truths. In other words, magic had an answer sheet. There was a way to visualize magic that was literally *correct*.

Having been the holy knight for as long as he could remember, Sain had effectively been given the answer sheet for light magic by the goddess herself. Since he'd been taught by the one who came up with the question in the first place, the answer he possessed was, by definition, absolutely correct. It was therefore unsurprising for the holy knight to be better at light magic than everyone else. At the same time, this meant that Sain had never learned magic the normal way, and only now was he beginning to grasp how important a role visualization played in the process.

He tried to feel the forest's darkness, tuning all his senses to capture the murky quality of the ambience around him. It was deep — maybe bottomless — and very black. But it wasn't even. Some parts were denser than others. There was a profound intricacy to it that would be invisible to the inattentive, yet could overwhelm the meticulous. The realization came to him with a wave of goosebumps.

"Hah... Haha... So it was just me. Everything I'd assumed, it was all just my own fantasy."

He'd thought it would be more ominous... more violent. But faced with true darkness, he found it to be... quiet. And eerie. And very cold.

"...Darku!"

Dark magical energy gathered in his palm and rushed forward in the shape of a bullet. As soon as it left his hand, it melded into the darkness around it. A split second after, the night monkey he'd aimed for flew off its branch, its body spiraling from the impact as it fell to the ground.

“Yes!”

Sain yelled in triumph. He’d done it at last.

That felt so different.

The process of gathering dark magical energy from the atmosphere and converting it into magic felt easier than usual. It was probably because the conversion was now happening efficiently, with very low wastage. Until now, his own assumptions about how dark magic was supposed to look and feel had impeded this process, resulting in an inadequate amount of conversion. Now that his efficiency had improved, the spell took less of a toll on him, as well, and he felt like he could still fire off plenty more.

“Okay, slow down there, buddy,” he said to himself. “Don’t get ahead of yourself. This is only the starting line. Next is practice. Lots and lots of practice, until my body learns to do this on its own...”

He was probably going to keep practicing until he keeled over from spellsickness today. By the time he crawled back to the dorm, he’d probably be in terrible shape. Melia would probably give him a serious scolding, and he probably wasn’t going to hear a word of anything that was said in class tomorrow. And he didn’t mind at all.

He was learning magic, and he was doing it through his own power. That thought alone kept him grinning all night long.

The next day after class, Sain made the familiar trek around the back of the library tower and met up with Marni.

“Miss Grim, let me say this first. Today... you will find me to be a changed man.”

“...Sure.” Her reply was curt, but she did narrow her eyes at him for a second.

As soon as their mock battle began, she put up almost a dozen *Darkus* in the air and sent them all toward him at once. Even a beginner-level spell was impressive when one could produce so many of them simultaneously. It was the kind of feat he had no hope of reproducing. But he didn’t need to; he only needed one. So long as he could get one good shot in...

He continued to evade her attacks, patiently searching for an opening. He wasn't going to give up. Not today.

Almost there.

He lunged sideways, and the barrage of *Darkus* narrowly missed him. Before she had time to prepare another volley, he struck back.

"Darku!"

A black sphere appeared, stretching into the shape of a missile as it shot through the air at Marni, faster, stronger, and darker than ever before. She watched it approach and... stepped out of the way.

She dodged it.

None of his previous attempts had managed to make her even bat an eye, much less move. For the first time, she'd dodged his attack. That could mean only one thing: she'd perceived his attack as a threat.

"...Looks like you made some progress."

A flicker of a smile appeared on her normally expressionless face. It was a small gesture, but it infused him with a profound sense of accomplishment. At the same time, he also noted that, ever since he'd become Marni's apprentice, he hadn't received a single word of praise from her. Until now.

"Hmhm... I am no longer the man I used to be. I have grasped the essence of true darkness. It has given me free rein over its grim powers. I have become one with it — a true denizen of darkness. I see all and feel all. There is nothing that can escape the omniscient gloom that surrounds me—"

"Ehh."

"Augh!"

He thought his enthusiasm would prove infectious, and Marni would share in his excitement. He was wrong. She was unmoved by his triumphant speech, and had instead fired another missile at him, which struck him clear in the side.

"Doesn't look like you saw that one coming."

"I-It's called hyperbole, okay? Geez. Ow, ow..."

Sure, he hadn't exactly become a master of dark magic, but he had improved, and he would have appreciated it if she had just let him have his moment. Evidently, she had no intention of doing so.

"The second principle of dark magic: remember and recreate. Dark magic is heavily influenced by the quality of the user's visualization. For magic like this, unfounded fancies and empty imagination is meaningless. You need concrete mental references, which can only be formed through repetition and experience. An innate familiarity with dark magic etched into your body and mind... that is what will allow you to use it effectively in battle. Remember and recreate. Now... Repeat."

"Remember... and recreate!"

"Good." Marni nodded with satisfaction. "It's time to move on. Next, you're going to start applying your knowledge to learn a couple of new dark magic spells."

"O-Ohhh... Yes... Finally, it's time!"

"But before that, we're going to keep doing mock battles for a little longer."

"...Oh."

"J-Just a little longer, okay?" she added quickly after seeing the look of disappointment on Sain's face. "There isn't much time left until the field exercises, so I can't teach you all the spells you need to build a solid foundation. Instead, I'm going to do a bit of research and figure out the best spells for you to focus on."

"...I see."

He was so close. All he needed was a little more patience. He took a deep breath, then slapped his cheeks with both hands and shook the disappointment out of himself.

There was still some training to do.

The mock battle resumed.

Whereas Sain was pumped and ready to go, Marni remained her impassive self, starting things off with the same volley of *Darkus* as before to keep him

busy. This time, however, he went on the offensive.

“Darku!”

His spell was now powerful enough to be a real threat, forcing Marni to actively move out of the way. As the missile flew past her, she took a moment to examine its quality.

Good. He’s actually doing the conversion.

While there exists the concept of “elements” with regard to the magical energy that permeates the atmosphere, that energy is ultimately nothing more than fuel. Gathering a bunch of fuel — that is, dark magical energy — and plopping it down in a pile isn’t going to result in a spell. There needs to be a process of conversion, in which the nature of the magical energy is transformed and it acquires the proper qualities. This process, which needs to happen before the spell is activated, is a fundamental skill of magic, and Sain had finally learned how to do it.

Satisfied with her apprentice’s progress, Marni decided that it was time to move to the next phase of his training.

“Spirits of the lost abyss, seize with cursed arms — Darku Halden!”

Using an incantation, she unleashed a dark spell that caused countless shadowy hands to shoot up from the ground around Sain’s feet.

“Gah! Darku!”

He leaped back and fired his projectiles toward the oncoming limbs. Marni calmly observed him as he fended off her attack, neutralizing the ethereal hands one by one by striking them with his own spell.

It’s not just me. He really does move well.

She didn’t know why, but Sain moved with the footwork of a seasoned veteran. There was a polish to it — an almost ruthless efficiency — that could only be acquired through sheer experience.

He’s downright awful at dark magic, but he’s unnaturally good at everything else.

His reactions were quick. He had presence of mind. And most importantly, he

never let his guard down. These were the qualities of someone who truly understood how to fight.

I was going to teach him some beginner-level spells, ones that are easy to use, but if he can move like this, then it might be a better idea to teach him something more practical.

He took advantage of every opening he found to throw out an attack. Refusing to be put on the defensive, he kept on the move, fighting both the barrage of pellets and his own fear to press forward. His actions were bold and deliberate — signs of a man who was not avoiding defeat, but seeking victory.

If he had just one spell... One good spell that could deliver the finishing blow... He'd morph into a completely different beast.

She saw in him an unwavering resolve to keep fighting. To never give up. What Sain had was the will to win, and she'd be a fool to squander it.

"I've made up my mind," she said, signaling the end of the mock battle. "Sain, for the next phase, you're going to learn practical magic that will actually be useful during the field exercises. Here's the catch: I'm only going to teach you one spell. We don't have time for anything more."

"Should I assume that means this spell you're going to teach me is particularly difficult to learn?"

"Yes... I wasn't planning to teach you this spell, so I haven't used it in the mock battles. Come over here. I'm going to show you how it's done."

With him standing beside her, she lifted her arm and held it out to the side. Dark magical energy coalesced in her palm, gradually lengthening into the shape of a long, narrow spear.

"Dark Ray!"

She swept her right hand across in a wide arc and launched the dark javelin forward.

"W-Whoa... Whoaaaaa!"

Sain let out a breath of awe. He'd never seen a spell like this before. This was no entry-level dark magic. It dwarfed *Darku* in both speed and power, cutting

through the air like a shooting star made of pure darkness and leaving a shadowy trail behind it as it sped toward its target.

“Well? Did you get a good look?”

“U-Uh... Sorry. I swear, I looked as hard as I could. I didn’t even blink. But it was still just a blur. God... I can’t believe how fast that thing was. Once you let that fly, it’s over. There’s no running from it...”

“Not bad for a first look. You noticed all the important features,” said Marni before turning to him and beginning her explanation in earnest. “The spell I’m going to teach you is called *Dark Ray*, which produces a very fast projectile with high penetrating power. In the hands of a skilled user, it can be effective even against monsters that normally should be too powerful to fight. In fact, with good enough aim, it’s theoretically possible to defeat any opponent with a single shot. If you manage to learn this... you’ll be a useful member of the team during the field exercises.”

“Wow... This is an amazing spell... But how come I’ve never seen anything like it before? It wasn’t mentioned in any of the textbooks I read in the library tower, either.”

“This is a spell created by us dark elves. It’s not in any of the regular textbooks.”

“...You mean this is some sort of secret dark elf magic? Are you sure you should be telling me about it, then?”

“The training you’ve been doing at night is based on a well-established dark elf training routine, too. I mean, sure, it’s not something we go around telling everyone, but it’s not exactly a secret, either. Also, it’s too late to worry about that, anyway.”

Sain nodded, relieved to hear that they weren’t breaching any ancient dark elf protocols. Then, he grinned.

“Mmhmhm... Finally, after all this time... I, too, shall have an ace up my sleeve... A dark magic spell that can deal a decisive blow! Haha... Ahahaha—”

“By the way, I should mention that it’s *very difficult* to learn,” she added in a soft voice, causing him to freeze mid-laugh. “*Dark Ray* is a spell that dark elves

developed by themselves, so there's no clear definition, but by human standards, it would probably be classified as advanced-level magic. It's one thing for us to be using it; our race is naturally gifted at dark magic. For you, it's another thing entirely. I doubt there are many humans who could use a spell like this."

"...Advanced-level magic," he murmured, his excitement wilting visibly as he repeated her words.

Magic spells were put into four categories based on how difficult they were to learn: beginner, medium, advanced, and master. For advanced-level spells, it was commonly understood that only those with considerable talent would ever be able to learn them. Such people were few and far between, and admittance into this exclusive circle doubtlessly required one to be blessed with abundant natural gifts. If Sain wanted to master this new spell, he would have to join their ranks. The question was, did he have what it'd take?

"Are you getting cold feet?"

"...Hah, of course not. Both me and my feet are all fired up to go. Advanced-level magic? Bring it on. I'll learn it, one way or another," he declared more to himself than anyone else.

Marni could tell he was putting on a brave front, but at the same time, she was also sure that he had every intention of turning his words into reality. She knew the kind of person he was. He certainly made bold claims, but they were backed by a dogged determination. That was why she'd decided to teach him this spell.

"I think you will, too, Sain. I believe in you," she said, causing his expression to brighten. "We're done with the nighttime training. From now on, you're going to focus on learning *Dark Ray*. Once classes are finished, we're going to spend two hours each day with me teaching you the spell. Then, it's mock battles until curfew."

"Got it. We're still doing the mock battles, huh."

"It doesn't matter how many spells you learn if you can't use them in a real fight."

Sain nodded, the gesture both an expression of understanding and commitment.

Chapter 3: Shadows in Motion

With seven days left to go until the field exercises, the vast majority of activities that the students partook in between classes and curfew had become some form of preparation for the upcoming event. The training gyms were packed so full that they had to be reserved in advance, forcing the rest of the students to share the grounds outside as they practiced.

“It’s about time for everyone to start spying on each other,” murmured Alicia as the day’s classes came to an end. She turned to Sain in a nearby seat in the room. “Are you still training with Marni today?”

“Indeed. I’m trying to learn a new spell right now, but... it’s not easy. Recently, we’ve gone back to the top floor of the library tower to do some more reading on topics that will help me with learning magic.”

“Huh... Marni’s pretty serious about this whole mentorship thing, isn’t she?” said Alicia. There was a hint of gladness in her voice. “Well, then. Melia, we should make ourselves useful, too. Let’s go gather some information on the other teams.”

“Understood.” Melia nodded and stood up.

“Hey, should I go with you?” asked Sain as the two girls were about to leave the classroom.

“You just focus on your training, okay? I can use my power now, but you can’t exactly use yours during the field exercises, right?”

She was, of course, referring to Sain’s powers as the holy knight. There’d be a terrible uproar if he let his true identity slip during the event. Also, now that he was aiming to become the dark knight, he wanted to rely on his powers as the holy knight as little as possible.

“Uh, true, but... this feels like I’m leaving all the menial work to you two.”

“Ugh, come on. Do I really have to say this out loud?” said Alicia with a sigh. “We’re rooting for you too, Sain, and this is our way of supporting you. We saw how happy you were to have found someone who can teach you dark magic,

and we know the training you're doing right now is necessary for you to fulfill your dream."

"Yeah, but..."

She was right, but it didn't make him feel any better.

"Although," interjected Melia, "it *is* a little fishy how you keep sneaking out of the dorm every night to go on secret dates with Miss Marni."

"Really?" Alicia's benevolent expression suddenly took on an ominous air. She leaned toward Sain and, her smile now showing teeth, said, "Tell me more about these... *secret dates*."

"I-It's not what you think! Honest! The only time I actually met Miss Grim was on the first night! After that, it was just me by myself! And that whole training regimen is already over!"

"...I guess it's true that he hasn't been sneaking out recently," admitted Melia, with some reluctance.

While he technically had seen Marni again when she showed up to give him a demonstration, he figured he didn't need to mention the second incident. They barely even talked, after all. Surely it didn't count.

"Then again, I guess there isn't too much to worry about. It *is* Marni, after all. She's not exactly outgoing, and it felt like Sain was more of a nuisance to her than anything else."

"That's true."

The two girls both nodded, satisfied by the conclusion they'd reached. Sensing that his reputation for innocence and integrity was no longer in jeopardy, he let out a sigh of relief.

"Anyway, we're going to go do some scouting on the other teams. We might also head over afterward to tell you what we found, so just keep that in mind."

"Got it."

With that, the two girls departed, happily oblivious to what they were about to witness a few hours later.

A few hours later, Alicia stood on the top floor of the library tower with one cheek twitching furiously. She'd come to tell Sain and Marni about what they'd found out, only to witness a sight that was decidedly upsetting.

"Hey, don't you think the two of you are... a little close?"

Sain and Marni gave her puzzled looks. After a few seconds, Sain let out an "Ahh" of comprehension. It seemed that both of them had been too focused on the content they'd been reading, and without noticing it, they'd ended up sitting shoulder to shoulder, poring over the same book. So, with this new realization, he said, "You're right. We are sort of close."

"Are we? I don't really mind."

"Neither do I."

The pair shrugged.

"Okay, back to the book, then. So, like I was saying..."

Neither of them made an attempt to remedy the issue that had been brought to their attention. In fact, as they'd just been discussing a very important detail, Sain immediately re-focused his attention on the book. To his surprise, however, he felt Marni's hands on his head. She pulled him closer and pressed the back of one hand to his forehead.

"M-Miss Grim?"

"You're starting to lose focus. Hm... No fever. I must have been pushing you too hard lately. Make sure you look after your own health, okay?" she said in her usual, impassive voice. It was a simple statement of fact, devoid of any suspicious inflections that would suggest embarrassment or affection. Nevertheless, it was enough to vex their sole spectator.

"All right, you two," said Alicia, a vein bulging at her temple. "This is... Hey. Hey! Are you even listening?"

Only after sticking her face right up against theirs did she get their attention.

"Marni, aren't you... getting a little too friendly with Sain?" she said, a mixture of anger and disbelief on her face.

"Am I?"

“Y-Yes, you are. I mean, normally, you wouldn’t touch shoulders like that... Oh, don’t tell me... Have you two been like that all this time?”

“...Have we? I don’t know. I never paid any attention, so I don’t remember.”

Marni’s casual indifference left Alicia speechless. She sputtered a little, but her efforts ultimately failed to amount to anything meaningful. Meanwhile, Sain was wilting under Melia’s reproachful glare.

“Master Sain, should we review the definition of personal space and your failure to observe it?”

“I... But... Isn’t this how apprenticeships are supposed to be?”

“Did you lose your brains again? Of course it isn’t.”

Sain sat with his knees in his arms, curling inward more and more as Melia continued her verbal assault. Just then, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Sain,” said Marni as she turned him around, pulled open his black coat at the collar, and ran her finger along his neck. “You have a cut here... It must have happened yesterday during the mock battle. You have to take care of your injuries properly, or they might get worse. Be careful, okay?”

“Hm, I didn’t even notice,” he said as he felt around the same place on his neck. When he pressed down, there was indeed a flare of pain. “All right, I’ll pay more attention in the future.”

“N-No touching! No touching, damn it!” yelled Alicia as she pounded the table. “Sain, get over here!”

She waved him over and directed him down the stairwell, where she backed him into a corner and slammed her hands against the wall behind him.

“You haven’t, I hope, forgotten about my *confession*, have you?”

Her face was so close that their noses almost touched, and her cheeks were flushed with color.

“O-Of course I haven’t, but I thought we already talked about that and...”

“I know... I know! Geez! I know how you feel about it, but...” She turned her eyes downward. “I know that, um... it’s not really my place to say this, but...”

can't you, you know, be a little more considerate? About my feelings? I-It's not like I, um, gave up on you, after all..."

"Uh, well, um..."

He had no idea how he was supposed to respond in situations like these, and he fumbled for words in vain. As for Alicia, it seemed that her embarrassment had finally triumphed over her adrenaline, and she was starting to tear up. Almost by reflex, he reached for one of his usual dark knight gags, but in a moment of — by his standards — profound wisdom, he realized that it probably wouldn't accomplish much except earn him a slap to the face. Instead, they were rescued by Melia's voice, coming from the top of the stairs.

"Hey, we don't have much time, so you two should probably come back soon."

Alicia responded with a curt "Okay" and headed back up. Sain followed a few steps behind, relieved that he was no longer being held hostage at nosepoint. As he passed Melia, he whispered, "Did you see?"

"A little."

"...Tell me, my maid. What was I supposed to do there?" he asked, his voice heavy with honest grief.

Melia replied, in a voice devoid of emotion, "Go kill yourself, please."

"Eh?"

"Go kill yourself, please."

It occurred to Sain at that moment that he needed to start learning about female psychology. His very life might depend on it.

Sain's training continued.

"*Dark Ray!*" he exclaimed, casting the spell Marni had taught him.

A long bolt of darkness was... definitely not what flew out of his hand.

"...What the hell?"

"...What *is* that, even?"

The lance-like projectile he produced traveled about a meter forward before

it bent downward at the nose like a limp noodle and fell weakly to the ground, whereupon it buzzed and slithered a little further along the gravel, before finally dissipating into nothingness.

“*That’s* what you were visualizing? Seriously?”

“O-Of course not!”

“How did you make it do that, then?”

“I don’t know, damn it! Ugh, let me try again!”

Fueled equally by determination and embarrassment, Sain quickly made a second attempt. However, no matter how many times he tried, he could only produce overcooked noodles of darkness, not the deadly spear-like bolts that he craved.

Every so often, between his attempts, he’d listen to Marni give him some advice. She explained that the spell they were learning, *Dark Ray*, was designed to maximize its speed and penetrating power. It had great utility: a well-aimed bolt could do wonders when mounting a surprise attack, and its blinding speed allowed it to be employed effectively in face-to-face battles as well. At the same time, the amount of energy it consumed also dwarfed that of simpler spells like *Darku*.

“Ugh...”

Being an F-ranker, its toll was compounded for Sain, and spellsickness quickly began to set in.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah... I’m fine. I’m just a little spellsick. I’ll get better soon,” he said with his forehead in his hand.

“Let’s take a break.”

He grunted, then nodded reluctantly.

“It looks like I’m still dead weight...” he said with a heavy sigh.

“You’ve improved compared to when we started. There’s no need to be so hard on yourself,” she replied, in her usual matter-of-fact tone.

“Thanks. I appreciate you saying that, but I’m making no progress in the mock battles either. Sometimes... I wonder if I’m really getting better.”

“It’s because I’m matching your pace of progress. As you get better, I’m trying harder, as well. That’s all. You might not feel it, but you’re stronger than you were before.”

“...I see.”

The tension eased from his shoulders, and his expression softened.

“That reminds me, does the school store sell any medicine for spellsickness?”

Spellsickness refers to the myriad symptoms that occur when too much magic is performed in too short a time. By taking certain medications, these symptoms can be alleviated or even cured.

“...They might.”

“I’ll go buy some, then. It’ll come in handy down the road for my training.”

“Sure. I’ll go get some drinks in the meantime.”

Possibly due to having caught the spellsickness early and resting, he was already feeling better; enough to walk around, at least. They parted ways, with him heading to the building’s eastern store and Marni heading to the one in the west.

“I remember it was this one that had some...”

Unlike the west store, which sold food and drinks, the eastern one sold things like medications, and he’d never been there before. As he walked down the hallway, he tried to recall the map he’d seen when he’d first come to the academy.

“The store’s a little further down that way,” said a voice to his side.

Sain turned to find a male student with a cocky grin. His short red hair was combed back, and his uniform — the one from Sain’s year — covered a tall and well-built frame.

“Sain Fostess, yeah?”

“Yeah, that’s me...”

“Rayde Eldis,” the student said, flicking a thumb toward himself. “Son and heir of Viscount Eldis. Ring any bells?”

“Ah, I remember hearing that you’re one of the candidates expected to take first place at the field exercises.”

“Hey, I’m liking you already,” Rayde said with a laugh.

Sain realized that he did indeed recognize the young noble, whose fierce appearance and bold smile had left an impression on him during practical lessons when their classes had mixed.

“As fellow members of teams that are contenders for first place, I’ve been interested in you for a while, Sain. So... What do you say? Walk with me to the eastside store? I’ll show you the way.”

“Well, sure...”

While it didn’t surprise him to know that his team was seen as a potential winner, this was the first time he’d received direct confirmation. Figuring it couldn’t hurt to talk, he followed Rayde down the hall.

“I know you make a beeline for somewhere as soon as classes end every day. What’s the deal? Training for the field exercises?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“Huh... Cool. I know Alicia and Melia both seem to be pretty fond of you, so I figured there must be something to you. Looks like you’re not a lazy bum, at least.”

“Do you know them?”

“Hard not to. Especially when you’re in the intermediate division like us. One’s been knocking everyone’s socks off with her displays of sheer talent ever since school started, and the other’s been a laughingstock, a girl from the Clan of Light who can only use fire magic. Granted... I’ve heard rumors that the latter has recently graduated from the ranks of the losers. Hell, I’ve even heard rumors that she might actually be on par with me and Melia.”

While Melia’s popularity was always without question, Alicia had also been making a name for herself — in a good way, of course — recently. That was why

she'd been flooded by requests to join people's teams as soon as the teacher had finished announcing the field exercises that morning in class.

"Just so you know, by the way, you've got quite the reputation yourself. Probably on par with those two, in terms of how many people know about you."

"Hah, that goes without saying. As the lord of darkness, my fame is but guaranteed."

"Eh, more like infamy, honestly—"

"Damn it, you don't all have to rub it in my face!" he complained angrily before muttering through clenched teeth, "Just... leave me alone..."

He was, of course, well aware that people called him the Darkness Dork.

"Gahaha! It's just like they said! You're a real riot!"

Seemingly amused by Sain's frustrated groaning, Rayde let out a hearty laugh.

"Who cares what they say? Just ignore 'em. I, for one, like hard workers like you."

Rayde's comment had caught him off guard, and he suddenly saw the young noble in a different light. He began wondering if maybe the two of them might actually get along pretty well. That lasted all of two seconds.

"More specifically, I like fighting hard workers like you. Call it a hobby. I love the thought of going all out and butting heads at full strength."

The red-haired noble apparently had a rather aggressive personality, as evidenced by how he proceeded to taunt Sain with a cocky grin.

"By the way..." Rayde continued, "where do you go every day after school? Not trying to spy on you or anything, but sort of curious."

"I go to the courtyard behind the library tower for lessons with Miss Grim."

"Miss Grim?"

"She's also called the master of the library tower."

Suddenly, the cheeky grin disappeared from Rayde's face, replaced by a disgusted grimace.

“You serious? The dark elf?” he said in a low, wary tone. “Look, just do yourself a favor and stay the hell away from that girl. It’s for your own good.”

Sain’s expression darkened.

“...Are you saying that because she’s a dark elf?”

“No, I don’t give a damn about whether or not she’s a dark elf,” Rayde said, his reply catching Sain by surprise. “It’s that craven attitude of hers that doesn’t sit well with me, always hiding her face and sneaking around as if she doesn’t want to be seen or something... I like strong people, and she’s clearly a wuss.”

“That’s not her fault. People generally don’t see dark elves in a very good light, and the students and teachers of this academy are no different. What she’s doing seems like a smart decision to me. It keeps her out of trouble.”

“Bah, excuses. At least, that’s not what her sister did.”

Sain frowned. “Sister” was not a word he’d ever heard in association with Marni.

“She has a sister?”

“What, you didn’t know?” Seeing the blank look on Sain’s face, Rayde shrugged and proceeded with an explanation. “Yeah, she’s got an older sister. The two of them were both students here, until she graduated from the junior division. I did my junior division in this academy too, so I remember them well... They were both dark elves, but the older one was a hell of a lady. She was dauntless. Like you said, there’s a ton of people here who discriminate against dark elves, and she always stood up to them. The younger one, meanwhile, just hid behind her back the whole time.”

Everything Rayde said was news to Sain. For some reason, however, he had trouble taking the young noble at face value. At first, he suspected that it was simply because this was the first time they’d spoken to each other. Then, a second thought came to him and he reconsidered. It wasn’t due to unfamiliarity; it was because the Marni that Rayde described didn’t match his own image of her.

“Look, just take my word on this. Forget about your lessons. That dark elf is the kind of person who can’t even walk outside without someone protecting

her all the time. What can you possibly learn from a coward like her?"

The more Rayde spoke, the more certain Sain became about his own reasoning.

She's a girl with a kind heart.

He knew Marni. He knew why she always kept her distance from other people. It wasn't cowardice; it was concern. She was probably worried that, as a dark elf, she'd cause trouble for other people if she was ever seen with them. Until he convinced her to take him as an apprentice, she'd refused to meet him anywhere except on the top floor of the library tower. Why? Because no one went up there and, therefore, no one would see them. And after he'd finished studying dark magic, the same reasoning applied to why she'd waited for him to head back first before leaving the tower herself. Not only was Marni a kind-hearted girl, she had the strength of character to see her kindness through.

"Thanks, but no thanks."

"What?"

"Miss Grim is not like what you said. She's a strong and resilient person."

Rayde's eyes widened for a second before narrowing again.

"Huh... Oh yeah? Then let's put your claim to the test," he said with a toothy grin, "during the field exercises. I'll see you then. Don't back out now, you hear?"

"Back out? Hah. I'm looking forward to it."

Sain matched him with an equally confident smile.

"Rayde?"

A voice came from behind the red-haired boy. He turned to find a girl approaching him.

"Huh? Yuria?" he said in a surprised tone. Then, he scratched his head. "Oh, I guess I've been talking for quite a while."

"I don't mind that, but..." said the girl before turning toward Sain. "Hm, I presume this is the famed loser of our year?"

Her attitude clearly showed that she looked down on him. Sain figured this must be Rayde's younger sister. Though they were twins, their appearances were rather different. Whereas the older brother, Rayde, had a rough-and-tumble mannerism to him that made him feel more grounded, his younger sister, Yuria, exuded an air of elegance that was characteristic of the nobility. Her silky hair was the same red hue as her brother and reached down to her waist. There was a slight curl to its ends that caused it to fan out toward the bottom. She stood a little taller than most girls her age, and her slender frame and well-defined features ensured that she turned heads wherever she went.



“Hello, allow me to introduce myself. I’m Yuria Eldis. Things I like: strong people. Things I hate: weak people.”

As it turned out, it was just their appearances that were different. On the inside, they were pretty much the same.

“It’s about time, Rayde. We should start heading to the training gym. The other team members are waiting for us,” she said, making it clear that they were training for the field exercises after school, as well.

“All right, see you, Sain. Don’t get knocked out before I get to you.”

“Hah, right back at you.”

They had another brief grinning contest, after which Rayde spun on his heels and sauntered off. Yuria followed him, but not before she shot Sain a dark glare and said, “Don’t get your hopes up. A loser like you won’t stand a chance against us.”

Sain made no reply. He simply watched with a silent grimace as the red-haired girl took her leave as well.

“Sain?”

Just then, someone called his name. He turned around to find the familiar sight of a blond-haired girl.

“Ah, Miss Gold.”

“Those two just now... They were the Eldis siblings, weren’t they? Did something happen?”

“No, we simply had... a *disagreement* of sorts.”

“Huh. Did you, now?” Alicia gave him a level look. “Hey, just between us... you probably shouldn’t take what those two say too seriously.”

“Hm? What do you mean by that?”

“The Eldises were originally a family that rose up through the ranks of the military. Even after they were given the title of Viscount, they showed no interest in politics, and spent all their time pursuing military accomplishments. Those two siblings are the exact same. I guess it runs in the blood or

something... Basically, what I'm trying to say is that they're a pair of battle addicts, and coming to you at this point in time is probably just an attempt at provocation."

"A provocation, huh..."

He thought of what Rayde had said about Marni. It seemed a little too real to be an act. Maybe he was just speaking his mind, and it ended up being a provocation at the same time.

"I thought this would just be another school event, but it looks like a lot of students really throw themselves into it."

He glanced out a window in the hallway. Ever since the field exercises had been announced, the campus bustled with activity once classes finished. The training gyms and the field outside were filled with students engaging in all sorts of practice. Recently, many students could even be seen going to the teachers for advice after class.

"It has a pretty significant impact on our grades, after all. Most importantly, though... It's because Jenifa's meritocratic culture attracts the kind of people who like proving their skills in a fight. For them, the field exercises are their first chance to figure out their relative standings. Honestly, you can't really blame them for getting so excited. Of course, being such an intensely competitive event, we do end up with missing students every once in a while."

"Missing students? What do you mean?" he asked with a concerned frown.

"It's not a regular occurrence, but apparently, it does happen once every few years. The field exercises take place in a very big forest. In a vast expanse of nature like that, monsters aren't our only concern. The forest itself can threaten our lives."

"I see... So we have to make sure we can safely survive the wilderness, as well."

He'd heard from other people that the forest the field exercises took place in was home to some fairly hazardous terrain. There were bottomless swamps and perilous cliffs, just to name a few possible perils. Wandering around such a dangerous location without adequate preparation was a good way to get

injured, or in the worst case, die.

“By the way, what are you doing here?” asked Alicia.

“I wanted to buy some medications for spellsickness from the eastern school store, and he was showing me the way there.”

“Oh, those are probably gone. People bought them all up already. With the field exercises on the horizon, it’s every student for herself,” she explained.

Just to be sure, they went and took a look around the store. Like she said, the medications for spellsickness were completely out of stock.

“...And that’s why I came back empty-handed. Sorry.”

After returning to the back of the library tower and explaining the situation to Marni, she contemplated in silence for a while before saying, “Tomorrow, meet me at the front gate after school. We’ll go into town to buy some.”

The next day, Sain and Marni made their way to the academy town.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been outside the campus at this hour.”

There were only five days left until the field exercises. Lately, Sain had been doing nothing but training after school, and his nights were mostly spent in his dormitory room. As a result, the lively bustle of the academy town felt fairly nostalgic. Unlike the campus, where there was a constant, simmering tension in the air, the atmosphere in town was peaceful. Outside a nearby flower shop was an old couple quietly browsing the arrangements. A mother passed by them, holding the hand of her young child who was pointing eagerly at a meat skewer stall.

The ambience was disarming, and Sain had to remind himself to keep his guard up... at which point he noticed that to his side, Marni seemed restless and kept looking around nervously.

“Miss Grim? Is something the matter?”

“N-No...”

She retreated further into her cloak, as though embarrassed, and continued walking, making no further mention of the matter. He shrugged and followed suit. For some time, neither of them spoke as they quietly walked beside each

other. Eventually, the silence seemed to get to her, and she cracked, whispering, “I-It’s... been a while since I’ve seen any other part of the town... other than the road that leads to school, I mean...”

Sain nodded in sudden comprehension. Considering that she’d been called the master of the library tower, it was easy to imagine that she’d led a pretty reclusive life. For an indoor hermit like her, the energy and commotion of the academy town must have felt fresh and exciting. Combined with her petite stature and delicate frame, he couldn’t help but see her in the same light as the children running around the town. Ultimately, however, that was little more than his own bias. Upon closer inspection, it was easy to see the rigidity in her motions — a sign of unease that would be absent in someone who felt at home. It was as if she kept telling herself that she’d never fit in. That she couldn’t live like the others. That her true self needed to be buried deep inside her. As proof...

She won’t show her face, huh.

The cloak that she’d taken off during their training sessions was now wrapped tightly around her, obscuring her face and hair, leaving none of her skin exposed. She was hunched forward a little, and she kept her arms close — presumably to make herself appear smaller and attract less attention.

“Do you know where the drug store is?” asked Sain.

“Yes... There’s a store I used a lot when I was in the junior division. The owner was an old man, but he was a nice person and sold things to dark elves like me.”

They went straight down the main street before turning into a side alley. The store was situated just a few paces in. It was a regular stone building of unexceptional size and scale. Marni paused in front of the door, possibly feeling a little wistful about her extended absence. Eventually, she placed her hand on the door and, with a look of resolve, pushed it open and stepped in.

Sain went in after her, at which point any doubt he might have harbored about the store’s identity was erased immediately. Upon entering, he was assaulted by a thick cloud of all sorts of scents, which mixed into a complicated and rather piquant odor that tickled his nostrils. The sheer amount of herbs on the shelves took him by surprise. As he looked around, he suddenly noticed that

Marni's gaze was fixed on the figure at the back of the store.

"...The owner's different," she whispered.

The man standing behind the far counter wore a profoundly unenthused expression as he finished up a sale with another customer, who turned around and began walking toward them, holding a bundle of purchased drugs.

"What's the plan? Should we leave?" asked Sain.

"...No. It's not like we're thieves. We'll buy the drugs here, just like we planned," she answered in a mildly defiant tone, before walking over to one of the shelves.

While they were no longer on school grounds, this area of town probably saw a lot of traffic from Jenifa, which would explain the large variety of drugs on the shelves meant for students. Soon, they found the spellsickness medication they were looking for.

"A silver each, huh... How many should we buy?"

"Four. Assuming you use one a day, you'll need four more until the field exercises."

He picked up four packages of the medication and brought them to the counter.

"These, please."

"All right."

The man behind the counter began calculating the total price with the same unenthused expression as before. Suddenly, his hand stopped, and his eyes narrowed suspiciously at Marni.

"Hey, you. You a dark elf?"

She froze. The long cloak over her made her look like any other girl, albeit with a small frame, but it was not a perfect disguise. Her hood could only cover so much of her face, and a careful observer could see the dark edges of her cheeks and chin.

"So what if she is?"

“...Price change, then. Five silver each.”

The curt response took Sain by surprise. For a moment, he stared wordlessly at the man. Then, a hot wave of anger rose up in him.

“G-Get out of here! Five silver? Who do you think you are?”

“Shut your trap! You think I have a death wish or something? I ain’t selling no spellsick drugs to dark elves! Who knows when they’ll go on a murder spree?!”

Unfazed by Sain’s outburst, the man shouted back, and they locked eyes, glaring angrily at each other.

Marni stepped up beside him and asked in a calm voice, “What happened to the owner who was here two years ago? He knew I’m a dark elf and still sold me drugs at the same price.”

“...He’s dead.”

Her eyes widened at the man’s answer.

“That was my dad. I heard he had a dark elf as a customer, but... You dark elves probably don’t know, but just before he died, business went into a real slump here, all because people were spreading rumors about how we were harboring dark elves in this store! Nothing good happens when you deal with dark elves! I want nothing to do with you!”

That’s not her fault!

Sain felt a tempest building up inside but, unable to put it into words, he could only express his rage through his clenched teeth and the whitened knuckles of his fists. All of a sudden, he felt Marni’s hand on his arm.

“Sain, it’s okay... I’m used to things like this.” There was no fluctuation to her voice. No hint of indignation. She simply took out her wallet from inside her cloak. “I’ll pay the extra amount. You just pay the original price.”

He looked her in the eyes, and in her eyes, he saw the truth. The repressed emotions. The unspoken pain. He shook her hand off, surprising her, and instead grabbed her arm.

“We’re leaving.”

He threw the packs of medication on the counter, spun on his heels, and pulled Marni out of the store.

“S-Sain, I... I don’t...”

He stopped, turned to the stammering Marni, and fixed her with a glare.

“Listen, Miss Grim. Maybe you’d rather keep a low profile, and maybe that’s the mature thing to do... But if someone insults a person whom I respect, then I sure as hell am going to give them a piece of my mind, maturity be damned!”

She stared at him, her mouth opening and closing but failing to produce any words.

“Let that guy spew his bile. You don’t have to take any of it. Let’s go find a different store.”

“Ah, but...”

He stormed off with her arm in tow. At first, she continued to sputter complaints, only to have them ignored. Eventually, she fell silent and allowed herself to be pulled along, a mixture of surprise and awe in her eyes as she watched the back of his advancing figure.



“...Well, we finally managed to buy some,” Sain said.

He and Marni were sitting at the edge of a fountain in the center of the town, holding a paper bag filled with medicine. In the end, they’d chosen to conceal Marni’s identity while they proceeded with the purchase at a different store. Widespread discrimination against dark elves wasn’t something he could reverse in a day, unfortunately. It made him seethe, but for the sake of Marni’s safety, it was better to keep her identity a secret when they were in town.

Behind them, the water from the fountain drummed out a rhythmic ambience, which amplified the silence between them. Ever since they’d sat down, Marni hadn’t said a word. She kept her eyes on the ground, her expression hidden by the side of her hood. Perhaps she was feeling tired. They’d done a lot of walking, after all. It had been an exhausting day, both physically and mentally.

“By the way, Miss Grim, do you have a sister?”

His question caused her to look up.

“Why?”

“I heard some rumors. And I was wondering, that first store we went to... You used to go with your sister, didn’t you?”

Though he phrased it as a question, he was already sure of the answer. The owner had said “You dark *elves* probably don’t know.” He’d used the plural. The other dark elf had almost certainly been Marni’s older sister.

“...Yes. I had a sister.”

She spoke in a low murmur, and she paused at times, but she slowly began to divulge her story.

“My sister is called Harti. She’s six years older than me... Until two years ago, we were both students here... The notorious pair of dark elves... The only two in Jenifa. She wasn’t like me at all. She was lively and outgoing. Even at school, she didn’t let being a dark elf get to her. It was like she didn’t even care about it. Of course, there was still a lot of discrimination, but she never ran away from that kind of thing. She stood up to the malice. She battled it head-on.”

“She battled it?”

“I guess you can say... she protested. Or, to be more blunt, she got in fights. But Jenifa Royal Magic Academy — officially, at least — opposes racial discrimination, so it was always the other students who were punished. My sister... she always protected me. I was always so weak, and I used her like my shield, hiding behind her all the time. Whenever people started bullying me, she’d show up and fight for me. We were both dark elves, but we were so different. She could do everything. And I... couldn’t do anything.”

In her story, she often spoke highly of her sister at her own expense, almost as if she felt guilty about something.

“...Your sister was a woman of courage, I see.”

“Yes, she was. Brave. Fearless. And then, two years ago... she suddenly disappeared.” She paused for a second to collect her thoughts, then continued. “It really was sudden. One day, she was gone. Just like that. I woke up in my room that morning and, like always, went outside to wait for her so we could go to school... but she never showed up. I went to her room to see what was going on and found her door unlocked. When I checked inside, it was completely empty.”

“...Did they search for her?”

“Of course. But they found nothing. Not even a single clue. Eventually, they called off the search effort... and even now, she’s still considered to be missing.”

“...I see.”

The burden of Marni’s past was far heavier than Sain had expected. He kept a calm face, but inside, he was reeling from shock. They’d known each other for some time now, but nothing she had done ever suggested that she had such a story to tell.

“But I think she’s still alive.”

His eyes widened further at the confidence in her tone.

“That’s why... I’m going to win first place at the field exercises... so I can ask

the headmaster to search for her again.”

He could see the resolve in her eyes as she spoke those words. It occurred to him suddenly that she’d expressed her strong desire to win when they’d first met.

“I see... So that’s why you wanted to be the one who gets to make the request of the headmaster...”

“Yes, that’s why.”

Sain thought back to the time when they’d first convinced her to join their team. She’d agreed, but only on the condition that, should they win, they would allow her to decide the specifics of their request to the headmaster. Now, he finally knew why. It was all for this one goal.

Marni wanted to see her missing sister again.

“Don’t tell Alicia or Melia about this. I don’t want them to feel bad for me. It makes things awkward.”

“...Understood.”

After Marni finished her story, they sat in silence for a while longer. Sain wasn’t sure what to say. A few times, he began to venture a comment, only to swallow his words when he saw the sorrowful expression on her face. He remembered how the drug store’s owner had yelled so viciously at her. It had hurt her, and she’d been hurting ever since. Wasn’t there something he could do? After mulling over his options, he leaped to his feet and declared in a firm voice, “All right! I’ve made up my mind!”

He walked in front of Marni and looked down at her seated figure.

“Consider this repayment for the time you spend teaching me magic every day. From this day forward, Miss Grim, I shall take the place of your sister!”

For a few seconds, both of them remained perfectly still. She stared at him with blank shock. He stood over her with a proud grin.

As a matter of fact, Sain had been meaning to do something for her ever since they’d arrived in town. Her remark about not having seen any other part of the town for a while had been accompanied by an expression too wistful for him to

ignore. It was easy to imagine that she'd enjoyed her time here in the past, when she'd lived freely under her sister's protection. They'd probably come to the town together, browsing its stores and stalls without a care in the world. At the very least, they probably weren't clutching tightly at their cloaks, hoping their hoods hid their faces. Marni was his mentor. As her apprentice, he had a duty and a desire to reciprocate her kindness.

"Mmhmhm, I shall be the one to indulge your willfulness today. Ask whatever you want of me. There's no need to hold back. Come on, I insist," he said, welcoming her demands with a confident thump of his chest.

His intention was successfully conveyed to Marni, whose expression brightened slightly.

"Thanks, but the thought is enough. You don't have to force yourself to—"

"Nobody's forcing themselves," he firmly cut her off. "Was your sister forcing herself to protect you? I highly doubt that. Most likely, your sister came to your aid, time and again, simply because she wanted to. She protected you, not because of duty or obligation, but because she felt genuine affection for her little sister."

Marni looked down at her feet for a while. Then, she nodded ever so slightly.

"I am the same, Miss Grim."

"...The same?"

"Indeed, for I feel genuine affection for you, as well."

"...Huh? Wha— Huh?!"

His statement elicited what was probably the biggest reaction he'd gotten from her since they'd met. She blushed scarlet and began stammering in a mild panic. Sain, oblivious to the effect he'd had on her, continued his speech.

"We are linked, you and I, by an intimate bond — the bond between mentor and apprentice — Nay, between fellow comrades in arms, about to brave the challenges of the field exercises."

"Ah... *That* kind..." she mumbled in a voice so low he could barely hear before looking down at her feet again. "...Sain."

“Huh? What?”

“...Tell me something. Do you often make girls mad at you?”

“...How did you know that?”

As a matter of fact, he'd just gotten a good scolding not long ago.

“I feel sorry for Alicia and Melia. Give them my condolences.”

“Wh-What do you mean by that? I'm pretty sure they're doing fine... as far as I know, at least... Aren't they?”

His rebuttal grew more and more uncertain until it just straight up turned into a question.

“Forget about taking the place of my sister,” she said as she looked at him and smiled. “Just be yourself, Sain... That alone is enough for me.”

Just be myself.

He immediately understood the intent behind her words.

“...All right. However, that doesn't change the fact that I've been meaning to repay you for all the help you've given me lately. Is there anything I can do for you?”

She took a moment to think before answering, “In that case... I want a book.”

“A book it is. To the bookstore, then.”

After seeing Marni get to her feet, Sain turned around and eagerly led the way.

Even if she couldn't show her face... Even if she had to hide the fact that she was a dark elf... Surely, there were still ways for her to enjoy her life. It certainly wouldn't be a comfortable way to live, but in no way was she doomed to misery and despair. That was what he wanted to convey to her.

“If we're looking for a bookstore that will satisfy the master of the library tower, then this has to be it.”

The bookstore Sain led them to was one of the largest in the capital. It was a long, single-floor stone building, and many customers could be seen through the windows walking to and fro inside.

“Do you go to bookstores often, Sain?”

“Mmhm. The library tower does have books about dark magic, but for the newest books, the easiest way to acquire them is to buy them here.”

“...I see. You’re a diligent one.”

“I just know what I have to do. That’s all.”

There was no inflection of pleasure or pride in his voice. It was a simple statement of fact. The sincerity with which he said it left an impression on Marni, and she thought to herself, *He has such cheesy build-ups when he’s trying to act cool, but the moments when he’s actually cool come without any warning.*

For better or for worse, Sain was the kind of person who didn’t pay much attention to how others saw him. Though his efforts to hide his powers often obscured his merits, resulting in him appearing like a flamboyant weirdo, his close acquaintances were well aware that there was plenty of good in him to appreciate.

Then, all of a sudden, he let out a loud shriek of surprise.

“No way!” he exclaimed. “That’s... That’s... *The Monthly Darkside?!’*”

“...The *what?*”

The mild heart-flutter she’d been feeling toward him ceased immediately, replaced by cold disillusionment.

“It’s a monthly magazine of a most ominous and forbidding nature, one that discusses the allure of darkness in all its forms. The depth and detail that pervade its contents show an understanding of darkness so thorough that some suspect the author is the dark knight himself... Never would I have imagined that I’d find such a gem here... But why? It wasn’t being sold here the last time I checked!”

Coming from someone who couldn’t even use dark magic properly until a few days ago, such a comment was understandably laughable. However, at this point, Marni had begun cluing into the fact that in Sain’s mind, the term “darkness” was more or less a placeholder for “something cool,” and did not

refer to the actual thing.

“O-O-Owner, you must tell me! When did you start stocking that book?!”

“Eh? What? Oh, that? It wasn’t selling well, so I took it off the shelf, but an ordering error left me with another copy, so I figured I’d leave it there and see what happened.”

“I-I’ll buy it! And I’ll keep buying them, so, please! Keep ordering the newest issues! I can’t find them in any other store in town!”

“Huh? Look, I’m trying to run a business here. I can’t just—”

“I’ll pay you double!”

“...Seriously?”

The owner shook his head but ultimately agreed to the request.

“For a *gem*, it doesn’t seem to be in much demand,” quipped Marni.

“Hmph, no matter the age or era, those who see its true value are rarely appreciated. We are doomed to live lonely and misunderstood lives,” he replied in a tone of heroic tragedy, eliciting a sigh from her. “In any case, Miss Grim, go ahead and pick any book you want. It’s on me today.”

“...Are you sure?”

“A man of darkness always keeps his word. I don’t want to make all the help you’ve given me seem transactional, though... I just want to express my gratitude in a tangible fashion,” he said with genuine concern.

Marni looked at him, thought about it for a few seconds, then said, “I’ll take the most expensive book in this store, then.”

“Uhhh... D-Does it... *have* to be the most expensive one? I mean, if it really is what you want, then—”

“Relax, I’m joking,” she said with a mischievous grin before walking over to a shelf to find something she wanted.

He watched her wordlessly from a distance, feeling a warm sensation radiate from within him. Her attitude and mannerisms had softened considerably since he’d first seen her. It was a sign of trust, and he was glad to have it.

“Sain, I think I’m going to need some time to pick one out.”

“Got it.”

Her eyes glimmered with excitement as she browsed the rows upon rows of books. While avoiding contact with people was ostensibly why she’d holed herself up on the top floor of the library tower, it was also possible that she just liked books.

I should go for a breather.

It looked like they were going to be here for a while. He stepped outside and regarded the distant, reddening sky. Lately, he’d spent all his time training, but it might be worthwhile to add a few more breaks into his schedule. The one he was taking right now was certainly proving to be quite enjoyable.

“Hello.”

Someone spoke to him. He turned around to the sight of an unfamiliar woman. She was taller than him, and her voice was smooth and steady. Her face was hidden by the hood of a plain black cloak, but he caught a glimpse of a few strands of silver hair, accentuated with blood-red highlights. Her approach had taken him by surprise and, in his uncertainty, he only managed to nod in greeting. His flustered reply drew a short, amused chuckle from her.

“You’re a student from Jenifa Royal Magic Academy, right?”

“...Yes, I am.”

“I’m trying to go to the west gate. Would you happen to know how to get there?”

“Hm, in that case, you should go back to the main street and head toward the fountain square. Then, keep going west. Don’t take any side roads, though. A lot of them don’t reach the gate.”

“Thank you very much. I assumed students would be familiar with the capital city. I’m glad I ran into you.”

Despite getting the directions she’d asked for, the woman seemed in no hurry to leave.

“Are you meeting someone here?” she asked.

“No, I’m waiting for someone to finish buying something.”

“Hmm. You mean her?”

The woman pointed at the bookstore’s window, where Marni’s cloaked figure could be seen. Sain felt his breath catch in his throat. How did she know who he was waiting for?

“Yes, that’s her...” he said cautiously.

“Sorry if I surprised you. Actually, I just happened to see you two walk in earlier.”

He nodded, relieved that it was apparently just a coincidence.

“Is she your friend?”

“Mmm... She’s many things. Friend, mentor, comrade... What she definitely *isn’t* is just another classmate.”

She replied with the kind of “hmm” that left much unsaid.

“That girl... You do know she’s different from other people, right?”

His breath caught for the second time since speaking to the woman. What did she mean by that question? Did she know that Marni was a dark elf? He stared at the cloaked stranger, carefully selecting his next words.

“Who are you?”

“That’s not important. Answer my question.”

The woman’s voice projected a sense of power that compelled him to obey. Feeling the tension thicken in the air between them, Sain decided to forgo all the questions he had and answer her head-on.

“I do know... but it doesn’t matter. I trust her from the bottom of my heart.”

“...I see.” The woman’s posture softened, as though she was satisfied by his response. “Well, I should get going. I hope you do well during your field exercises.”

She turned and walked away. Sain watched her until her figure melted away in the distance. Only then did the peculiarity of her final words hit him.

“...How come she knew about the field exercises?”

Did she have something to do with the academy? If so, it would explain why she knew Marni was a dark elf, and the question she'd asked would make sense. In the end, however, he was left with nothing but an uncomfortable number of questions, and the woman's identity ultimately remained a mystery.

“Sain, I'm done. Thanks for waiting.”

The bookstore's door opened and Marni appeared.

“Did you find a book that you want?”

“Yes, it's over there.”

They returned inside and she pointed at a book on one of the shelves.

“Huh... That's a pretty thick book.”

“It's used, so it's not that expensive.”

He pulled it out and examined it. It had the kind of weight that befitted its aged appearance. A glance at the price tag revealed that it was indeed on the cheaper side. It was apparently a book about medicinal herbs.

They brought it to the counter and Sain paid for it. The staff wrapped it in a thin layer of protective paper and handed it back to them. Marni carefully cradled it like it was her baby as they walked out of the store.

“Sain... Thank you,” she said once they were outside. “Today was, um, a lot of fun... so if you have time... I'd be happy to do something like this again some other day.”

Her eyes were downcast, and her voice trembled a little. Under her hood, her face was as red as an apple.

“Sure. We'll go shopping again some time. Assuming my wallet can handle it, of course...”

“...I'm not asking you to keep buying things for me.”

Marni pushed her lips out in a petulant scowl at Sain and his misplaced worries.

By the time Sain and Marni each returned to their respective dormitory

rooms, the woman in the plain black cloak had rendezvoused with a man near the capital city's west gate. The man was tall and skinny, and below his smooth crimson hair was a pair of amber eyes.

"That took you a while. Weren't you just going to take a quick look?" asked the man.

"Yeah, but I ran into an interesting kid along the way."

He raised an eyebrow at her answer but seemed to lack the interest to inquire further.

"And? How was she?"

"Hmm... Leading a better life than I thought. She looked happy."

"Happy? A dark elf?"

"She's found a good friend, apparently."

The man snorted.

"None of that is going to last. You should know that well. There's no place for dark elves. Not in this kingdom... Not even in the entire world. That's why we're here. To *save them*."

The woman pursed her lips but said nothing back.

"She's the same as you were. Dark elves all carry deep scars in their hearts. That makes them more susceptible to Chaos. I doubt we even have to wait the whole five days to approach her. We can bring her into the clan right now."

"That's... no good. We should stick to the plan," replied the woman.

The man tsked with annoyance.

"Ugh, the plan. 'Taking her away during the field exercises won't run the risk of people realizing it's a kidnapping.' 'They'll assume it was an accident and write her off as a missing person,'" he said as he ran his hand back through his hair in exasperation. "I know this plan of yours is safe and all, but it sure is tedious."

"I've said this before, but in the end, we're going to let her decide and respect her choice. If she refuses, we back off. Got it?"

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Still... there’s no way she’ll refuse. She’s the same as the old you. A wounded heart doesn’t heal easily.”

“...Maybe not. Who knows.”

The man’s confidence was not reciprocated by the woman. The face of a young boy surfaced in her mind. True, a wounded heart did not heal easily, but maybe the presence of trusted friends could put it on the path of recovery.

“The student council president, though... Now that’s someone we have to watch out for,” muttered the man. “He’s a freaking monster, that Cain Theresia. Whatever we do, we have to make sure we don’t run into him... He was a serious handful last time, when I came to bring you in.”

“Yes, and that’s why we’re going to do this during the field exercises. To prevent him from getting in the way.”

The field exercises were undertaken by first-years of Jenifa’s intermediate division. The student council president, Cain Theresia, was from a different year and therefore would not be present. Furthermore, the event was taking place in the Trowa Forest, which was half a day by horse-drawn cart from the capital city, where the academy was situated. Even if Cain caught wind of something happening during the field exercises, it would take him some time to get there. While such details should have been unknown to these outsiders, the two of them had still somehow taken them into consideration for their plans.

“Are the Beasts ready to go?”

“Yeah, no problem. I’ve already hidden them in the area.”

“Convenient, isn’t it? That power of yours to control Beasts.”

“Hah, jealous? You don’t need to be, really. It doesn’t matter how many small fry you control. They’re still small fry. You, though... Your melding with Chaos is far deeper. Hell, you’re the reason I rose up in the clan.”

“...Second generation, was it? Doesn’t feel very special,” said the woman, placing a hand on her chest, as if she were trying to feel something inside.

“You don’t have to feel special. You just have to *be* special. And trust me, that power you’ve gained is nothing to scoff at. I’d wager you’re a match for even

that president guy.”

“Let’s hope we don’t need to find out. It’s better that we go unnoticed.”

“True.” The man snickered. “I’ve got high hopes for your little sister, you know.”

The woman looked down at the ground. She didn’t answer.

There were three days left until the field exercises. While Sain and Marni had been training together by themselves after school, with less than four days until the actual event, their team had decided to dedicate the remaining time to fine-tuning their teamwork.

“Come on, Sain, you have to move faster! You almost ended up as collateral damage there!”

“S-Sorry!” Sain apologized to Alicia as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

It was after school, and they were practicing in the training gym Melia had reserved for them. All four of them were present, and they planned to keep refining their teamwork until sundown. During the event, Alicia and Marni would be their attackers, while Melia provided support. For the time being, Sain had been appointed to the role of team support, and he was training himself to be ready to back up any other member at a moment’s notice.

“I do admit that you’re a little less wimpy than before,” said Melia to Sain during their break.

Alicia nodded beside them.

“Yeah, your dark magic actually works now, as long as you land a hit. Plus, your footwork is top-notch. I guess we have Marni to thank for getting you in shape through all those mock battles.”

There had been a time when Alicia had literally swatted away Sain’s *Darku* with her hand. Fortunately for him, she actually needed to defend against it properly now. On top of that, all the battle experience with Marni had refined his positional awareness during heated combat and against a stronger opponent, drastically improving his agility and spacing. He now moved like an expert.

“But... the problem is I still have no way of landing a decisive blow,” said Sain in a dejected tone.

While Marni had been teaching him the dark elf spell *Dark Ray*, he still hadn’t managed to learn it properly. Currently, the only spell he could cast reliably was *Darku*.

“Our team has a lot of firepower to begin with. There’s no need to get caught up on how strong we are individually.”

“Marni’s right,” added Alicia. “Even if you just run around and mess up the enemy’s tempo, that’s still a big help. I’m not saying it wouldn’t be better if you could do some real damage, but, you know...”

“Compared to a month ago, I think this is pretty good progress. We can’t really expect much more. There just isn’t enough time left,” said Melia.

Both Alicia and Melia offered their own opinions regarding Sain’s concerns. They were right, of course. There just wasn’t enough time left. Even so...

“Dark Ray!”

Sain stayed behind in the training gym and continued to practice the spell on his own. A dark lance flew from his palm, shooting forward through the air. However, it only covered about five meters before it started to break apart at the tip, vanishing completely before the ten-meter mark.

“Damn it... I’m so close... I’m so close, but...”

He was almost there. The spell was taking shape. All he had to do was keep it from disintegrating mid-flight. Once he managed that, the spell would be complete. It felt so close that he had to be just one step away from success. Another fortnight or so, and he’d probably have it figured out. The problem was that he wasn’t going to make it in time for the field exercises.

Ever since being told of Marni’s wish, he’d wanted to do something for her. As an apprentice, he had a natural duty to oblige his mentor. It was more than that, though. He also just had an honest desire to fight for her. The sight of Marni during their shopping trip in town was still fresh in his memory. He remembered the way she’d hidden herself away behind both her cloak and her indifference. If her sister returned to the academy, she’d have a chance to act

more like herself.

Okay, calm down. Don't get hasty. Slow and steady wins the race.

It was already eight at night, and there was only an hour left before curfew. The practice they'd done today was physically demanding, and the team had agreed to retire early to their dormitories to rest up for tomorrow. Sain, however, was too aware of his own deficiencies to relax in his room. After returning to the dormitories with his team, he'd set out again by himself for the training gyms. Though he hadn't reserved a space, the gyms were empty at this time in the night and could be used freely. After a while, however, he paused and considered just how little progress he was making. He simply couldn't see himself improving enough by doing the same thing for three more days.

"...Maybe I should pay that forest another visit."

His thoughts turned to the forest Marni had shown him. It was where he'd learned the correct way to use dark magic. Perhaps its somber atmosphere could help him master *Dark Ray* as well. Either way, it was worth a try.

"...Right, then."

With his mind made up, he returned to his room again and rested until the curfew at nine. After answering the housemother's call, he stepped out of his room and knocked on the adjacent door.

"Yes, Master Sain?" asked Melia as she opened the door. "What is it?"

"I apologize for asking so late at night, my maid, but I need your help. I wish to restart the training I used to do at night."

"That's fine... but are you sure your body is going to hold up? Weren't you just practicing at the training gym?"

"...Why do you know that?"

"Because I'm your maid, of course," she said with a polite curtsy.

Sain wasn't quite sure how to unpack all that, but there was no time for self-reflection. He had to prioritize. After bidding her farewell, he snuck out the back door and made his way toward the forest. He followed the same path Marni had shown him, leaving through the east gate and venturing past the city walls.

Suddenly, alarm bells went off in his head.

“What the—?! This is...”

He stopped immediately and took off the necklace he wore. To the other students, that necklace was nothing more than an accessory — a perpetual reminder of his terrible fashion sense. The truth, however, was only known by a select few. The jangling trinkets he covered himself with were all magical seals used to suppress his actual power. He removed them, allowing the power of light within him to flow freely.

He quickly turned his attention to the cause of his mental warning and, after discerning its source, unleashed his attendants’ powers as well.

“Melia. Alicia.”

As soon as he spoke their names, he felt two pulses from the direction of the dormitories, signifying the unlocking of their powers of light. Then, he waited. After about ten seconds, he figured his attendants had probably calmed down from the abrupt onset of power, and spoke to them through his mind.

Sorry, we’ve got an emergency on our hands, so I had to unleash your powers. I’m currently using a power known as telepathy. It allows me to communicate with you from a distance using my mind, he said telepathically.

Using your mind? came Alicia’s thoughts. *Wh-What about me? Is this working? Do you hear me?*

Loud and clear, Miss Alicia. Very good for your first try.

Melia, having been his attendant for years, was already familiar with the process. Alicia seemed to have quickly gotten the hang of it as well, so he got right to the point.

I’m going to keep this brief. I sense the presence of Chaos outside the city walls. The two of you are to split up and hunt them down.

Split up? But... I can’t sense any Chaos.

Alicia’s thought-voice was hesitant.

Now that I’ve unleashed your powers as an attendant, you should be able to sense them, too. If you don’t feel anything, it’s probably because you’re just too

far away. Head out past the city walls first, and then find where the Chaos is.

Master Sain, where are you right now? If you're close, I'll meet up with you first.

Don't bother. I'm already close enough to engage some of them. I've confirmed the presence of four of them, so far... Two are just outside the east gate. The remaining two are near the north and south gates, respectively. I'll handle the ones at the east gate, so I'm leaving the others to you two.

I'll take the south gate, then, replied Melia.

Then the north gate's mine. I'm going right now, Alicia confirmed as well.

Sain and Melia lived in a different dormitory building than Alicia. There wasn't much difference between them, but Sain and Melia's was situated a little closer to the south gate.

If Chaos is allowed to run free in a place like this, they'll cause immeasurable damage... Don't waste any time. Hit them hard and fast.

Understood.

Got it.

Sain kept his telepathic link with the two girls active as he fully unleashed his powers as the holy knight. The black dye in his hair bled away, revealing his original blond, and his jet-black outfit brightened into a coat of pure white.

"Found it! There's the first one!"

With a powerful leap, he shot through the air, covering several hundred meters in the span of a breath. The creature didn't even have time to react before Sain was in striking distance. He swung his arm in an arc, sending the glowing blade of light that extended from his palm straight through its torso.

"As I thought... a Beast," he said, watching the two severed pieces fade into nothingness. It never even had a chance to growl.

Blood-red creatures like the one he'd just vanquished were known as Beasts of Chaos. Within the ranks of Chaos, they were small fry. Occupying the lowest position in the Chaos hierarchy, they were treated as common grunts. That did not, however, mean Beasts should be taken lightly, and inexperienced fighters

were to steer clear of them at all costs. When it came to Chaos, even a common grunt was far more dangerous than a regular monster.

While normal humans had no chance against them in combat, Alicia and Melia were his attendants. Having been imbued with the power of the holy knight, mere Beasts presented little challenge to them, and they should each be capable of defeating one on their own.

“Sanctuary.”

A ripple of light extended outward from Sain’s feet, sweeping across the ground in an expanding circle that infused it with the blessing of the goddess. Though it would fade after some time, while the blessing endured, Chaos would be unable to tread upon the sacred ground.

He immediately began moving toward his second target. Against a background of darkness, wrapped in a pulsing cloak of light, his figure as he dashed across the open plains was like a shooting star in the night sky.

Master Sain, I’m done with mine.

Melia’s voice echoed in his mind as he ran.

That was quick. If you don’t sense any others around you, then go help Alicia.

Roger that.

Her thought-sentence barely finished before a swift swing of his glowing blade made short work of the second Beast. For the holy knight, vanquishing Chaos was akin to a normal person’s day job; after a while, it became routine. He didn’t even bat an eye as the Beast fell to the ground and its blood-red carcass decayed into nothing.

“Sanctuary.”

In the same fashion as before, he infused the ground around him with the blessing of the goddess.

“Phew... That should do it for the east side.”

Only the north gate remained. He was just about to head there to help Alicia when her bewildered voice rang in his head.

What... happened here?

Alicia? What's going on?

Um... I'm not sure, to be honest. I don't know why, but, um... she said, stammering a little. I sensed a presence, so I went toward it, and... I just got here, but the Chaos thing is already dead.

Sain stopped in his tracks.

What do you mean?

I-I don't know... But, like... there are signs of battle here. I think it's probably from light magic, but...

Then, Melia's voice entered the conversation.

So what you're saying is... somebody killed it.

There was a period of silence as Sain and Alicia considered the implications of Melia's conclusion. Somebody had killed it.

But who?

A Beast was no regular monster. The existence of Chaos wasn't even public knowledge to begin with. Anyone who fought them thinking they were regular monsters was going to have a very bad time, but judging by Alicia's description, the person had likely dispatched the Beast with ease.

...Let's stop thinking about that for now. Alicia, is there any more Chaos near you?

No, it's safe here.

Okay, then the battle is done for the time being. Sorry for calling you out so late at night. After your attendant powers are suppressed, please make your way back to the dormitories.

Alicia's voice grew uncertain.

Are... you sure? We still don't know who it was...

We don't know who it was, but if they're killing creatures of Chaos, then, at the very least, they're probably not our enemy. The holy knight and dark knight aren't the only ones fighting Chaos. There are others who oppose Chaos and are

trying to eliminate them... While I'd love to learn the identity of our mystery fighter, I doubt we need to be too wary of this person.

...All right, then. I'm going to start heading back to the dorm.

That was when Melia chimed in.

By the way, if you don't mind me asking, Miss Alicia... How did you get out of the dorm?

Huh? What do you mean? By the front door, of cour— Ahhhh! The housemother! Ohhh, I'm going to be in so much trouble!

...Poor Miss Alicia. Here, I'll go with you to apologize.

Sain felt a smile creeping across his lips as he listened in on their amusing exchange. He quelled his holy knight powers and put his necklace-shaped seal back on. Coincidentally, the second Beast had been close to his original destination, the dark forest, and it wouldn't take long for him to head there and begin his training. Just as he was about to go, though, he heard the rustle of grass.

"...Sain?"

He spun on his heels at the sudden mention of his name, only to come face to face with Marni, who stood motionless, her eyes wide with shock.

She saw.

Those were the only two words that appeared in his mind before it went blank. The conclusion of the battle had lulled him into a false sense of security, and that brief moment of negligence had led to him making a terrible mistake. He'd let his guard down. He'd let himself be seen.

What was Marni doing here? Why here of all places?

Questions flashed in his mind, fleeting and futile. He knew why, of course. It was obvious. She was probably worried about her apprentice. During their practice session today, she'd seen his frustration. She knew he was troubled by his own powerlessness. And she'd figured — correctly — that he might return to the forest she'd shown him.

"Why... How come you..."

Her voice was hoarse. Tears welled up in her eyes. She blinked them out as she turned and ran away.

“W-Wait!”

He began running after her, but stopped after a few steps. How would he explain what she saw? Even if he caught up, what could he possibly say? He stood there, watching Marni’s figure shrink more and more into the distance before it disappeared. The sky grew darker, but it couldn’t match the gloom that had enveloped his heart.

There were two days left until the field exercises. During this critical time when every team should be making their final preparations, Sain’s was instead in the midst of a crisis.

“So... You’re telling us that you blew your cover, and Marni knows your true identity now?” asked Alicia.

“...Yeah.” Sain nodded with a look of deep concern. “As soon as Miss Grim saw my true form, she dashed off as if she wanted to get away from me.”

“Well, I mean, I don’t blame her. Seeing you like that in the dead of night can really throw someone for a loop. You probably scared her off.”

“No... That wasn’t what it felt like.”

He revisited that awful memory of last night. He’d seen the moment when it had dawned on her — when she’d realized that he was the holy knight. But just before she’d ran off, he’d also seen that there were tears in her eyes. He couldn’t shake that last glimpse of her from his mind. It wasn’t fear that brought up tears. It was sorrow. Heartbreak.

“It looks like you’re going to have to talk it out with her,” said Melia.

“...Yeah, you’re right,” he nodded.

After classes finished for the day, he made his way to the library tower alone, unaccompanied by Alicia and Melia. While the two girls had argued that they were just as involved in the matter and should go with him, he convinced them to let him go by himself first.

“...She’s not here.”

Their after class mock battles were so routine that the back of the library tower had become an unspoken meeting spot for them. Today, however, Marni was nowhere to be found. He entered the tower and climbed to the top floor, where he was greeted by the same dimly-lit space. The purple phosphorescence that had illuminated their first meeting glowed unchanged. The tables and chairs they'd laid out for their studying sessions had been put away as well. Marni herself was sitting on the ground at the back of the room. Everything was just as they'd been when they'd first met, as if all the time they'd shared together had been rewound.

"Miss Grim."

Upon hearing her name called, her eyes shifted away from the book in her hands. She looked up at him.

"What do you want?"

There was an edge to her voice. He chose his next words carefully.

"...I came to talk."

Slowly, ever so slowly, he approached her, hoping not to provoke her in any way.

"Go away." She held up a hand toward him, rebuffing him in both gesture and tone. "Come one step closer, and I'll attack."

There was the faint glow of dark magical energy in her palm. She was serious. He could feel a clear hostility from her.

"B-But why? I... I just want to tal—"

"I have nothing to say to you."

"...I apologize for keeping my identity a secret from you until now. But circumstances forced me to—"

"Get out of here!"

He flinched. That was the first time he'd heard her raise her voice — not just raised, but *screamed*. Marni, the girl who always wore a mask of calm indifference, had screamed at him in anger. She violently threw back the gray hood that so often hid her face, revealing cheeks flushed with color and eyes

filled with emotion. Wet, teary emotion.

“You lied to me. All this time, you kept lying to me... The holy knight doesn’t need to learn any dark magic. This past month...was all just a game to you... I’m glad you had fun tricking me for your amusement!”

“What? No! It wasn’t a game at all! I was serious about learning dark magic! And I still am! I swear to you, Miss Grim, that this apprenticeship was not for my amusement!”

“Then tell me... Tell me why the holy knight is trying to become the dark knight.”

Sain’s words caught in his throat. He had no simple explanation for his goal. Even if he were to venture a response, he doubted she’d actually believe him. He held her gaze and kept his composure. As he racked his brain trying to come up with a credible answer, however, he noticed Marni smiling. It was a twisted smile, all mockery and scorn. And it was directed not at him, but herself. At that moment, he knew: his hesitation had cost him.

“...You can’t answer,” she said, shaking her head as though she thought herself a fool. “You can’t answer because there *is* no answer. In the end... You’re just the same as the rest of them. You saw that I’m a dark elf, and you figured you’d have some fun with me... I thought you were different... That you weren’t like them! I trusted you!”

The dam of her eyes finally gave way, and her tears overflowed. They streamed freely down her cheeks as she screamed at him with the pain and rage of trust betrayed.

“N-No, that’s not... I didn’t...”

Sain sputtered uselessly, his mind desperate but blank. What must he say? What should he do? How could he mend their fractured friendship?

“...You wanted to save the goddess, didn’t you?”

Hearing Alicia’s voice behind him, he turned to find her approaching. Melia was with her. Their expressions were sober.

“When... did you two get here?”

“Just now. We came because... Well, we figured it’d end up like this,” Melia said with a sidelong glance at the tearful Marni.

Alicia turned directly toward him and, looking him in the eye, said, “Tell her, Sain. I think Marni has the right to know.”

“...Yeah, you’re right.”

With a resigned nod, he walked over to Marni’s side and spoke in a solemn tone.

“Miss Grim, everything I’m about to tell you, I speak of in confidence. I ask that you promise me you won’t tell anyone else.”

He regarded the girl, silently acknowledging that he had indeed deceived her. He’d enlisted her help in pursuit of his dream but kept her in the dark about every crucial detail. Letting out a slow, deliberate breath, he gritted his teeth and made up his mind.

Marni deserved better. She deserved to know.

“I do have an answer to your question. I am trying to become the dark knight... because I wish for the goddess’s salvation.”

He proceeded to tell her everything.

Sain first met the goddess when he was five years old.

Will you be my knight?

As she spoke those words, there was a hint of sorrow in her eyes, and a slight trace of loneliness. He accepted her request, and thus began his life as the holy knight.

In the process of naming him her knight, the goddess conferred upon him the power of her divine blessing — a power so potent so that it made him, still a young child, a renowned hero. It granted him unparalleled mastery over all forms of light magic, and so he wielded it, using his tiny, delicate hands to save the lives of countless people.

Sain, dear, you really are terrific. You’ll be the best holy knight there ever was.

“That’s not true.”

Though the goddess resided in the heavens, she would occasionally project an image of herself to Sain to indulge in some banter. Sometimes, she would show up in his dreams. Other times, she'd appear at his side. Her image was always indistinct, so much so that he had to squint to make out the hazy outline of a faint specter, translucent and mirage-like. Her illusory appearance, however, was not to hide her presence; no one but the holy knight could see her, after all.

Therefore, in this current age, the only person who could converse with the goddess was Sain. It was a fact that did not sit well with him, and it was frequently on his mind.

One day, he and the goddess were discussing their wishes and dreams.

Sain, dear, is there anything you want? You know, a wish of some kind?

"Not especially."

If he was being honest, he'd say that he wanted to do something for her. To repay her in some way. Ever since the day of their first meeting when he'd become the holy knight, the sight of her lonely, wistful expression had never left his mind. He was frequently reminded of it, too; in the days since, he'd seen her with the same expression on many occasions.

It was an expression he didn't want to see on her. Not anymore. And so, he kept his silence on the matter and turned the question back at her.

"What about you, goddess?"

Me? I... Hm, well... I...

She stammered a little. Then...

I wish I could... live with somebody. Together.

It was the first time she'd ever revealed her true feelings. For as long as he could remember, she'd never said anything like it before.

Not as a goddess. Not watching from above. But together. Like any other person. As an ordinary human being... I want to live the same lifetime as someone else... To walk through life at the same pace, sharing the same seconds, minutes, and hours... It won't ever happen, of course. I know that. But sometimes, Sain, dear, when I'm talking to you, I start thinking... of how nice it

would be if this never ended, if we could stay like this all the time, and I start wishing... that I could live the same lifetime as you...

He listened carefully, etching each and every word of hers onto his heart.

A-Actually, you know what? Forget about what I just said! I was being weird!
added the goddess, in a flustered tone.

He didn't forget, though. And he swore to himself that he never would, because he now knew what he must do.

Until now, the goddess had accompanied numerous holy knights, and without exception, she had parted with every last one of them. Each parting undoubtedly took a piece of her heart away with it. That was why, when they'd first met, she'd looked at him with sorrow in her eyes. For the goddess, every pact with a holy knight was the promise of an inevitable parting.

From then on, Sain began searching for a way to grant the goddess her wish. He spared no effort, asking everyone from his attendant, Melia, to scholars and professors he met traveling from place to place during his missions as the holy knight. In the end, he reached a conclusion: he couldn't fulfill her wish. Not as he currently was. No human could allay the loneliness of a divine being. If he wished to live alongside the goddess, he would have to become her equal.

One day, a man in jet-black garb appeared before Sain.

"You're the holy knight, yeah?"

"Indeed. I am the holy knight. Who might you—"

"I'm the dark knight."

Endowed with the blessings of Shartegallia, the goddess's male counterpart, the dark knight was the holy knight's inverse complement. Sain was well aware of the existence of his opposite twin.

"You're trying to become the next Shartegallia?"

Though Sain didn't know how the man obtained this information, he was correct. In order to provide the goddess with the company she sought, Sain was looking for a way to become her counterpart.

"...I am."

“You are, huh. In that case, I’ve got a message for you from His Holiness. If you become the dark knight, then he’ll grant you a chance to take his place.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean exactly what I say. His Holiness is currently looking for a successor. By custom, the current dark knight — in other words, me — is in line to succeed him, but if there’s somebody else who actually wants to climb onto that lofty throne, then things are a little different. If you prove yourself worthy of the role, then His Holiness is willing to pass his seat to you.”

“...Wait, then what happens to His Holiness? The current one?”

“He goes poof.” The man shrugged. “What? Were you expecting something else? Sorry, buddy. There’s no retirement in the god business. Appointing a successor isn’t a ticket to paradise. It’s a ticket to oblivion. Man can become god, but god cannot revert to man. Them’s the rules... For gods, power and life are inextricably linked. To give up one is to forfeit the other.”

“...What about you, then? Are you okay with that? I’m going to be taking a role that was meant for you.”

“Me? Hah, you think I want it? Unlike you, my work involves some truly ghastly shit. It’s a shit job, and I get a ton of shit for doing it. If I could quit, I’d have done so ages ago,” the man said with a scornful chuckle. “But even so, His Holiness and I, the dark knight, are tasked with keeping peace in the world — the same as you and your goddess. We have a job to do, and the stakes are both very real and very high, so we can’t just blindly give our mantles away.”

“...What do I need to do?”

“Become the dark knight.”

Sain’s eyes widened at the man’s answer.

“That’s the minimum requirement, and it’s also your only way of proving to His Holiness that you’re worthy of his consideration. How you do so is up to you. In fact... you’re free to take the mantle from my cold, dead hands if you so wish. You feeling up to it?”

“...I’ll pass on that offer.”

“Hah! A wise choice! After all, what would the world think if their two defenders of peace went to war with each other over personal desires? So... I hope you choose your methods wisely, O great hero of light.”

The dark knight brought with his sudden appearance a wild proposal that bordered on the preposterous. Absurd though it might have sounded, Sain had no other leads, and he agreed to the man’s idea. There was now a tangible method for him to fulfill the goddess’s wish. With his objective established, he began to slowly lay the groundwork for his grand plan.

You...want to quit being the holy knight? The woman’s eyes were large and incredulous. *Wh-Why? Why would— W-Was it me? Did I do something wrong?! I’m so sorry if I did...*

“It’s not that. I just have a new goal now.”

A... new goal?

The young boy answered with a look of unbending pride.

“I’m going to become the dark knight!”

After finishing his story, Sain looked up to find Marni staring at him, her eyes opened so wide he thought they might pop out of their sockets.

“To save the goddess...” she murmured.

“That’s right.” He nodded firmly. “I don’t want to leave her by herself... That’s all. That’s my only reason for forfeiting my powers as the holy knight and trying to become the dark knight. Maybe it’s all nonsense to you... Maybe you won’t understand why... But I’m serious about it. I’m serious about becoming the dark knight.”

It was possible that his wish would not resonate with Marni. It was even possible that if he were to tell the world, he would not find a single sympathizer. After all, the holy knight was the only one who could interact with the goddess. His predecessor had already passed away, so he was currently the one and only person in the world who knew the goddess’s true nature.

Who would have imagined that the goddess felt the same emotions as man? Who would have imagined that such trifling matters could ail her so?

“Now that I seek the mantle of the dark knight, the glory I won through the power of the holy knight is nothing but a burden. On top of that, if word got out that the holy knight is trying to become the dark knight, there would be widespread protests. It would sow the seeds of unrest. That’s why I’ve lived under a false persona, hiding my identity the best I can. But thinking back on it... perhaps I should have told you the truth from the very beginning. You, Miss Grim, have become an indispensable figure in my quest to become the dark knight. If only I’d realized sooner... I could have prevented all this unnecessary confusion... I’m truly sorry. This was all the result of my thoughtless actions.”

Sain and Marni had become comfortably acquainted with each other, and he wanted it to remain the same way even after the field exercises. He thought of her as a friend as well as a mentor, and his respect for her was no fleeting trifle.

“...I’m the one who should apologize.”

His sincerity thus managed to win back her trust.

“I knew...” Marni continued. “I knew you were serious about it, and still... But it was so sudden, and I couldn’t think straight, and I said a bunch of things I didn’t mean... It’s my fault. I’m sorry.”

She lowered her head in a deep bow. After exchanging mutual apologies, the tension in the air dissipated, and the very room seemed to brighten. The two of them looked at each other, their smiles weak but earnest.

“Well, since we’re all here, why don’t you tell everyone about what you’re after in the field exercises, Miss Grim?” Sain proposed. “I mean, I’ve already turned this into a confessional session. You might as well take advantage of the opportunity.”

“...Okay. I’ll share my secret, too.”

Marni nodded and began divulging her story to Alicia and Melia. She spoke of her sister, Harti, who had gone missing, and how she intended to ask the headmaster to conduct another search. Afterward, both Alicia and Melia let out a sigh, as if an enduring mystery was finally solved. They must have been wondering why Marni was so determined to win first place in the field exercises, as well.

“I’d heard rumors that Marni’s sister had gone missing... I see that they were true,” said Alicia. “You could have just told us, though. What’s with all the secrecy?”

“...You’d just have felt sorry for me. I didn’t want to make things weird.”

“Well, things got plenty weird anyway,” she said with a hint of exasperation. Then, she added, “Besides, friends share secrets. And I consider you my friend, so...”

She trailed off, perhaps feeling a little embarrassed to finish her sentence. Her meaning was clear though: *I hope you consider me your friend, too.*

“All right, tomorrow’s the big day,” said Sain. “Let’s stay focused and make sure we’re as prepared as possible.”

They all looked at each other, and four heads nodded in unison.

The day before the field exercises, Sain and Marni were both in the courtyard behind the library tower.

“Okay, Sain, use the spell again.”

At Marni’s command, Sain held out his arm and shouted, “*Dark Ray!*”

Dark magical energy congealed in his palm before morphing into the form of a spear. All that remained was to launch it and have it maintain its shape. If he could do that, he’d succeed.

“Hnnnnghhh...”

Keeping it in the shape of a spear was difficult. Magical energy slowly seeped outward, causing tiny streaks of black lightning to dance across its surface. He grunted in exertion as he tried to keep the spell under control, but it ultimately crumbled and scattered into the wind.

“I’d say we’re about seventy percent of the way there.”

“Damn it... If only I could figure this out in time...”

“It’s a shame that you won’t learn it in time, but this is already an absurdly fast pace of improvement, honest. Let’s call it a day for now. We don’t want you to be exhausted tomorrow.”

Though it was earlier than when they usually concluded their training, her concern was fair. With the session concluded, he took a deep breath and stretched.

“Sain.”

“Huh?” he said mid-stretch.

“*Darku!*”

“Augh?!”

She launched a missile at him point-blank.

“Geez! What was that for?!” he exclaimed after he barely managed to contort his already-dilated body enough to dodge the strike.

She regarded him with calm, searching eyes.

“I always wondered why you moved so well. Now it makes sense... You’re the holy knight, after all.”

“...Sorry I didn’t tell you.”

“We’ve already been over this. It’s past us now. I do admit I wish you’d told me sooner, though.”

Sain bit his lip at her grievance. Just then, he heard Alicia’s voice.

“I swear, you two just don’t know when to stop... Today’s the last day, you know? Can’t you just take it easy?”

It was followed by a second voice, which spoke in a snarky drawl that could only have belonged to Melia.

“I don’t know about you, but being sore all over seems like the opposite of ‘as prepared as possible.’”

He turned to find the two girls at the entrance of the courtyard. They were, however, accompanied by a third figure — an old man whose gray hair was matched by his gray beard.

“Sir Knight, please excuse my intrusion,” said the man with a polite bow.

“Ah, Headmaster.”

“I hear that you had a bit of a scuffle last night that caught me unawares. I was wondering if I could be briefed as to the details.”

Sain had intended to report the incident immediately, but it was too late at night, and the headmaster had already left the campus. He’d sent word to the headmaster this morning that he wished to discuss something today, but it seemed that Alicia and Melia had taken the initiative and brought the man here. Furthermore, they’d already given him a summary on the way here, so it didn’t take long for Sain to fill in any remaining details and complete his report.

“Hm... Beasts of Chaos appearing outside the city walls...” the headmaster mused.

“For the time being, I put up a barrier around the capital city,” said Sain, “but have everyone stay vigilant, just in case. While the city’s interior should be safe, I can’t keep all the surrounding areas protected.”

“The merchants going in and out of the city will need guards to protect them. We’ll use the pretense of dangerous monsters being spotted nearby to announce a state of high alert... I suppose I should also ask the royal knights for assistance.”

“Do you have a map? I want to show you some details regarding where the Chaos appeared.”

The headmaster didn’t have a map handy, so he used magic to draw one on the ground in front of him. Sain bent down and began adding marks on it with his finger, pointing out high-risk areas and locations that required extra attention. His teammates watched from the side, impressed by how he handled such matters with the proficiency of a consummate professional.

“Is this the kind of stuff he deals with all the time when he’s acting as the holy knight?” asked Alicia.

“Pretty much. The job comes with... responsibilities. Lots of them,” answered Melia.

The concentration evident in his expression and the serious tone in which he spoke were features that would normally be impossible to associate with him. Right now, they were looking not at Sain the student, but the holy knight on

active duty.

As Marni watched him work, she quietly whispered to herself, “If people saw this side of him... He should show them...”

None of the other students in the academy had ever seen this side of Sain. They only knew him to be an ostentatious dork. They’d never witnessed him as he was now, intently discussing matters of city-wide safety with the headmaster of their school. If he behaved like this on a daily basis, he’d surely have a much easier time at school.

“At the very least, he wouldn’t be called the Darkness Dork,” quipped Alicia.

“He is the holy knight, after all. He’s earned his fair share of glory,” said Melia.

The reason Sain never boasted of his accomplishments was because he himself did not feel proud of them. Everything he did, he did for the goddess. All his life, that had been his fundamental drive, until the day he realized that, as the holy knight, he could never offer her the salvation that she sought... From then on, the dark knight had become his goal.

“Well, then. I shall bid you farewell for now. I must make haste to the citadel.”

The headmaster turned to leave.

“Wait, there’s something I need to ask you.”

“Oh? What else would you like to know?”

Sain’s brows furrowed as he spoke.

“Last night when we were fighting the Beasts, there was one that we didn’t get to. By the time one of us got to it, it was already dead. Someone else had killed it... Do you have any idea who it might have been?”

The old man picked at his beard for a moment before answering, “I would be lying if I said no.”

“Then who is—”

“I’m sorry, but my lips are sealed on this matter. This person is a bit special, and let us just say... it’s complicated.”

“...I see.”

Seeing that he'd get nothing else out of the headmaster, Sain bid farewell to the headmaster without further inquiry.

"Well, now that just makes me want to know even more," muttered Alicia.

"Yeah... but if he knew who it was and chose not to tell us, then we can at least assume it wasn't anyone dangerous. That's good enough for now."

With one important matter out of the way, Sain let out a sigh of relief.

"It looks like we can all relax a little now. With the headmaster's help, we should have all our bases covered, even in the case of an emergency," said Melia.

"Right. I'll have to thank the headmaster again, later. I did check the areas surrounding the city to make sure there were no more of them left... but there do exist beings of Chaos that are hard to detect, even with my powers as the holy knight."

Alicia frowned.

"Does that mean there are different kinds of Chaos? Like, normal ones and special ones?"

"...Hm, that reminds me. I haven't told you about any of this yet. There exist certain kinds of Chaos that can hide their shape and presence."

"...Now that you mention it, I do remember you saying something like that when you saved me in the labyrinth. What was it again? Something about generations and originals?" she said, remembering the events of the past month.

"This seems like a good chance for me to set the record straight, then. Let me do some explaining about Chaos for you, Miss Gold. Miss Grim, I'd like you to listen as well."

Figuring he might as well get everyone on the same page, he began filling in Alicia and Marni about Chaos. They were a part of this now; they needed to know.

"A long, long time ago, Chaos, in an attempt to break free of the seal His and Her Holiness had placed it under, created seven monsters. We refer to them as

the Founders of Chaos. The Founders have the ability to share the power of Chaos with their subordinates. It's likely that the Beasts of Chaos I recently fought were originally some normal monsters that had been given a portion of a Founder's power. You can think of it as... a kind of heredity. Like us, Chaos has generations. The first generation is the Founders. The Beasts I just fought are of the fifth generation. The ability to dole out their power to their subordinates ends with the fourth generation. From the fifth and beyond, they lose their control of themselves, becoming feral beasts that act purely on primal instinct, absent any reason or intelligence."

"Then what about the thing that got me a month ago? Was it turning me into some generation of Chaos?"

"That's right. You, Miss Gold, were on the verge of becoming part of the fourth generation of the Founder known as Ganmei Hajun. Each of the seven Founders have been given names. Ganmei Hajun, which etymologically speaking means something like 'Mighty Shield,' is shaped like a massive turtle, and it perpetually deploys a special barrier around itself that disintegrates anything it comes into contact with. When you came under its influence, you also received a portion of its power.

"Each Founder is unique in its power and appearance. Senbou Kairai, for example, looks like a monkey and can freely control its subordinates. Its name is derived from the phrase 'Thousand Puppets.' Then there's Fubaku Yuukai — the 'Unchainable Specter' — a fish-like creature that can hide itself from view. They're such strange and eccentric beings that some consider them legendary creatures hailing from myths of old. In fact... Remember how I was saying there exists Chaos that can hide its shape and presence? I meant Fubaku Yuukai.

"Fifth-generation beasts can be considered small fry. Fourth-generation Incarnations like the one I and Miss Gold defeated last month are still manageable. But when it gets to the third generation and above, they can give even me trouble. As for the Founders themselves, numerous holy knights and dark knights in the past have fought them and lost."

If they could defeat the holy knight and the dark knight in battle, that meant there was no one in the world strong enough to beat them. Hearing this, Marni spoke up.

“Those Founders... Are they still alive somewhere in the world?”

“Yeah, but... All existing Founders have been sealed away by my predecessors of many generations past. That’s why, these days, the holy knight and dark knight only need to hunt down their remnants.”

His explanation seemed to afford Marni some peace of mind, and she said, with a sigh of relief, “Thank the gods... I was worried you had to place yourself in a lot of danger. I’m glad you don’t.”

Sain opened his mouth but no words came. For a while, he remained still, chewing over what Marni said. She gave him a puzzled look.

“What?”

“Uh, well... I just...wasn’t expecting to hear that. I mean, my usual self is one thing, but I didn’t think anyone would worry about me knowing I’m the holy knight. It... surprised me. That’s all.”

He scratched his head and smiled awkwardly, only to freeze when he felt two iron grips on his shoulders — one on each side, one from each girl.

“So, my worrying doesn’t count, huh?”

“I’d like a refund on all my worrying, then.”

He slowly craned his neck around to find Alicia and Melia smiling at him. They had the kind of smiles that came with bulging veins in their temples.

“S-Sorry, I...”

He withered under their decidedly unfriendly smiles and spent the rest of their meeting apologizing profusely to the two girls.

There was, in fact, another lady he should have apologized to, as the goddess watching them from on high almost certainly shared the same opinion as his teammates.

Chapter 4: Field Exercises

The day of the field exercises finally arrived. First-year students of Jenifa Royal Magic Academy's intermediate division loaded themselves onto horse carriages waiting outside the city's west gate, which soon began making their way toward the site of this year's field exercises, Trowa Forest.

"The field exercises shall commence shortly!" announced one of the male teachers in a loud voice after all the participating students had gathered before him. "You have two objectives! The first is to survive for ten days in this forest! The forest is home to countless dangerous animals and plants, and students are to pay the utmost attention in ensuring the safety of themselves and their teams! Furthermore, during these ten days, students are expected to be fully self-sufficient, so bringing in any food and drinks from outside is strictly forbidden!"

The students nodded along to the teacher's explanation. They'd already heard this explanation in class, and none of what he was saying was new information. The only things they were allowed to bring in with them were weapons and medicine intended for personal use. All medicine was examined beforehand to determine if it was truly necessary, and only approved items could be used.

"The second objective is to fight and win! The field exercises are both a survival test and a battle royale! Defeating another team earns your team one point. Surviving the full ten days earns your team five points. The final ranking will be determined based on total points!"

Again, nothing new. There were no questions, and the students waited for the teacher to continue.

"However, this is ultimately for your education, and we have no desire to see our students die in the process. To that end, we have given each of you an item known as a substitute pendant."

Sain looked down at his chest, where a new pendant now hung, somewhat camouflaged amongst his other trinkets. It was not, however, one of his seals, and it bore a simple design with a black gem set in the center.

“That pendant will act as your substitute, absorbing pain and damage in your place. Upon receiving damage that would otherwise be fatal, the pendant will shatter, at which point a powerful barrier will be deployed around the wearer. Once this barrier is in place, the student will be considered down and thus out of the competition. The barrier is too powerful to be broken by students, making it impossible to attack any participants who have already been downed.

“In addition, the substitute pendants will also absorb damage from effects such as poison. While you may not feel the damage itself, should you fail to apply the appropriate antidote and allow the poison to spread, your pendant will continue to take damage. In that case, it won’t take long for your pendant to shatter. There will, of course, be a learning curve. The inclusion of the pendant will require you to behave differently than usual. However, remember this simple rule: while wearing the pendant, anything that would have otherwise killed you will instead remove you from the event. The effect is ultimately the same, and I trust that you will all adapt to its usage in no time.

“I should also mention that, while the pendant will absorb damage, it will not protect you from all sensation. In order to prevent students from growing careless in their risk management, we have purposefully stopped the pendants from absorbing the sensation of pain. Do nothing more dangerous than you would have without them. Know your limits, work with your teammates, and survive until the end.”

If the students had any illusions about the pendant’s protective abilities, they were dispelled by the teacher’s final statement. The item was used to enforce the rules of the event, not give the students an edge in their survival or combat. Relying on its effects would be foolish.

“You may now begin moving! Ten minutes later, we will signal the start of the event, after which all combat will be fair game!”

At the teacher’s command, the gathering of students immediately began to thin.

“We should move, too,” said Alicia.

“Time to get going,” agreed Melia.

Sain and his team made their way deeper into the forest, as well.

“So, it finally begins,” he murmured as they moved.

Alicia smirked at him.

“What, are you nervous?”

“N-N-Nervous? Me? Of course not! I... I’m totally normal!”

“I’m not sure you could be any *more* nervous...” said Melia, as she gave him a flat look.

The sound of shuffling footsteps caught their attention, and another team of students appeared nearby. The air tensed a little as they traded glances, and the other team moved on without a word. No one felt like chatting with people who were minutes away from becoming enemies.

“...All right, enough joking around. Let’s go over the plan again,” said Alicia, her voice calm but sober. “We have three goals today. One, we find a water source. Two, we set up camp. Three, we secure food. We’re going to do those things in that order.”

“Preferably, we won’t have to run marathons between our base camp and our water supply, so we should start by looking for a river or something,” Melia added.

“Right. And in the worst-case scenario, we can go for a day without food. Also...we could always raid another team and take theirs.”

Sain nodded in agreement. It was only during the first ten minutes when fighting was forbidden. Afterward, all combat was fair game.

“Marni, are you good with that?”

“...Yes.”

Marni nodded at Alicia as well.

“If push comes to shove, I can move by myself at night. Dark elves have night vision.”

“I’d rather you don’t have to... but yeah. We’ll keep that in mind. If things really get thorny, we’ll have to ask you to work the night shift.”

Even by herself, Marni was no slouch in battle, but the thought of her

wandering alone in a forest full of monsters was still uncomfortable. It wasn't a lack of trust; as friends, they just didn't like the idea of sending her out by herself. Just then, they heard the loud pop of something exploding overhead.

"I guess that's the signal?"

"Yeah... From now on, we have to watch out for monsters *and* the other teams."

Trowa Forest was massive, and the teams had all been moving away from each other until the signal sounded. At the moment, they didn't sense any enemies nearby.

Alicia gestured for their attention.

"You all remember when we discussed the results of our scouting report, right?"

"Yeah."

Sain recalled the discussion they'd had on the top floor of the library tower.

"As for people we should watch out for... The Eldis twins come to mind."

"You mean the twins that everyone thinks have a good shot at winning first place?"

The report that Alicia and Melia had compiled was simple and easy to understand. In general, when it came to head-on battles, Sain's team could handle whatever came at them. The opponents might be Jenifa students, but they were still first-year intermediates. Meritocracy or not, they didn't stand a chance against the sheer firepower wielded by Alicia and Marni.

There was, however, one exception. The Eldis twins were the only ones they couldn't afford to lump in with the rest. Any attempts to defeat them had to be carried out with the utmost caution.

"The two Eldises are both fivekind, but they have completely different styles of fighting. The brother, Rayde, is good with fire and earth magic, and his style can be summed up as 'hit it until it breaks.' In terms of fire magic, you'll probably see him throwing out a lot of the same spells as me — Flare and Velle Flaram, for example. His earth magic is pretty much the same."

“I see, I see. Basically, we can just assume there’s another one of you on their team,” quipped Melia.

Alicia scowled.

“...Somehow, I feel like I should be upset about that comment. But anyway, you get the idea.”

“What about the sister?”

“Yuria is a little like you, Melia, in that she likes to play with compound magic. She doesn’t use fire and water, though. Her specialty is earth and water, and the effects are... muddy? Or maybe I should say swampy. Either way, compared to her brother, her magic is more supportive and focuses on disabling enemies.”

Melia then showed them a list of spells the twins could use. The list went on and on, its sheer length and variety attesting to the rumors of their prowess. It far surpassed the level of most intermediate division first-years.

“...Preferably, we only fight them when we’re fully ready,” mused Sain.

“Yeah. Fortunately for us, they’re a real aggressive pair, so they might wear themselves out fighting other people before we even get to them,” said Alicia.

While Sain would certainly appreciate it if his opponents willingly put themselves at a disadvantage, the Eldis twins’ strength was on another level. He wasn’t sure if the other students could even present enough of a challenge to them to weigh them down with attrition.

“I hear water.” Marni’s announcement put a stop to the team’s chatter. “This way.”

They followed her lead and soon came upon a narrow river. It wasn’t particularly rapid, but there was a place where it flowed right over a small rocky cliff, and a constant splashing sound was audible from below. Seeing that the water itself was clear, Marni scooped up some in her hands and brought it to her mouth.

“...It’s fine. We can drink this.”

“Lucky us. Let’s start setting up camp, then,” said Alicia, as she gave the ground a few stomps to check its firmness. “This place is pretty good. The

ground is solid, and we won't have to worry about the river overflowing, even if it does rain."

She pushed aside a small boulder to make some room, revealing a couple of creepy crawlies that squirmed past her feet. They didn't seem to bother her in the slightest. Melia wasn't the type of person to lose her cool over a few bugs, either, and as for Marni, well, she came from a race that literally felt right at home in environments like these. Dainty damsels these were not. The ladies of Sain's team had some serious guts.

"Miss Marni and I will be the lumber team."

"Sure."

Alicia nodded as Melia and Marni went off in search of materials to set up their base camp. There were plenty of trees along the riverbank, but most of them were wet or cracked in places. Building a cabin would require sturdier wood, so they headed deeper into the forest.

"All right, Sain, we'll be the leaf team, then. Start gathering. We'll need them to make the roof."

"Got it."

While Sain and Marni had been spending all their waking moments on his magic training, Alicia and Melia had been busy doing all sorts of preparations, which included figuring out how to build a simple cabin. Had they not explained the process to him beforehand, he — having done nothing but shoot dark magic at things day in and day out — would be completely useless right now.

He walked around, gathering leaves from the nearby trees. One of them had particularly big ones. Figuring those would be good for the beds they'd eventually have to make, he approached it, only for a chunk of earth to burst through the thick mass of leaves and fly at his face.

"Hm?!"

As the attack had come from afar, its aim was slightly off, and he only needed the slightest tilt of his neck to avoid it. Nevertheless, it was doubtlessly an attack. A magic one, at that.

“Taking fire!”

He dropped his leaves on the ground and prepared to fight.

“Good timing on their part. They attacked just after we split up.”

Alicia followed suit, dropping her leaves and getting ready to engage.

Four boys emerged from the trees. They’d already drawn their weapons and clearly intended to use them.

“Okay, Sain... Think you can do this?”

“Hah, a foolish question. I do not think. I *know*. The darkness in me—”

“See, that’s the kind of answer that makes me less confident in you.”

“Augh, damn it! Look, I can hold my own, okay? Just watch me.”

Sain’s complaint earned him an even more skeptical look from Alicia.

“In fact, aren’t *you* the one we should be worried about, Miss Gold? Can you handle this?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re in a forest, you know. If you go in with fireballs blazing, you’re going to —”

“Don’t worry.” She smiled boldly. “You weren’t the only one who was training. I also got a lot better at controlling my power.”

Holy fire was a special power that was extremely tricky to wield. For the past month, Alicia had dedicated a significant portion of her time to mastering its usage.

“I’m going to distract them,” she said. “Hit them while they’re confused.”

With both hands held toward the four opposing students, she began her incantation.

“Great torrent of fire, turn all into ashen seas — Velle Flaram!”

Raging white flames enveloped their view, threatening to swallow them whole.

“C-Crap, it’s coming!”

“Stand your ground! It’s fake! There’s no heat!”

“But...”

As Sain rushed toward the boys, he took a moment to appreciate what Alicia just did. She’d used her holy fire to disorient their opponents. Though heatless, its fire was whiter than normal, and it was exceptionally effective at impairing vision. Everything, from the concept to the execution, was impeccable. He wouldn’t have been able to recognize it before, but under Marni’s tutelage, he’d gained a deeper understanding of magic. He could now tell that Alicia had mastered the usage of her power.

“I-I can’t see anything in thi—”

“*Darku!*”

“Wah!”

He aimed a dark missile at one of the disoriented students, sending it flying toward his gut. As it flew, the holy flames that blanketed the area parted around its path like two massive tides, ensuring that the projectile would encounter no magical interference before reaching its target. Simultaneously, Alicia was in motion toward another one of the four boys. She dashed up to him and caught him by surprise. Placing a hand on his chest, she showed him a fierce grin.

“No forest to worry about at this distance, is there? *Flare!*”

“Gyaaaah!”

The boy went flying backwards, propelled by the point-blank impact of an orb of flame. Normally, using magic like that would risk damaging the caster as well, but once again, Alicia had made clever use of holy fire’s properties. She’d tweaked the spell’s composition, keeping the part that hit her opponent as real, ow-it-burns fire while making the part that recoiled back at her holy and harmless. By skillfully controlling and making simultaneous use of both versions, she’d turned herself into a menace in close-quarters combat as well.

The pendant of the student who’d been sent flying cracked audibly and deployed a pale blue barrier around him.

“Sain!”

“I know! I got them!”

The remaining two boys began to flee. Sain aimed his right hand at them. The rules of the field exercises stated that one point was rewarded for defeating an enemy team. However, a team was only considered defeated when all of its members had been downed. If even a single person got away, then no points would be awarded. Furthermore, whoever defeated that final member would win the point for their team. If Sain allowed them to escape, some other team might end up taking the point. His team would lose its chance to take its first step toward victory. He thought of Marni — of her desire to find her sister — and began gathering dark magical energy in his palm. This was it. All that training had been leading up to this moment.

“Taste my ultimate technique! *Dark Ray*— Augh! Why does that always happen?!”

His lance of darkness shot toward the fleeing students, only to do the wet noodle thing soon after launch and spend the rest of its short life slithering along the ground. As Sain held his head in frustration, the remaining two boys looked at each other, let out a smirk of relief, and continued retreating.

“Spirits of turbid water, grasp what you seek — Wortá Halden!”

“Spirits of the lost abyss, seize with cursed arms — Darku Halden!”

Two pairs of magical arms lashed out at once, one set made of water and the other made of darkness. They erupted from the ground and clung to the boys’ ankles, causing them to fall over screaming.

“Looks like we made it just in time.”

Melia and Marni appeared with bundles of wood strapped to their backs.

“...Sorry we’re late.”

Seeing that they’d caught the last two students, Sain let out a sigh of relief. With their whole team rejoined, they walked over and surrounded their two magically ensnared victims.

“W-Wait! We give up! No more, please!”

“I don’t see any reason to stop,” said Alicia, her voice cold as ice. “Do any of you?”

Neither Melia nor Marni gave any response. Feeling the metaphorical noose tightening around their necks, the two boys turned to Sain in a panic.

“H-Hey! You! Darkness Dork!”

“Who’re you calling Darkness Dork?!”

His unflattering nickname had proven surprisingly popular, becoming a bit of a viral phenomenon in the campus. Almost nobody called him by his real name these days. Even the teachers slipped up sometimes.

“Y-You’re a guy, too! You’re on our side, right? You must understand our noble goal!”

“Your... noble goal?”

“Yeah! Look, we’re aiming to win. And when we do...we’re going to ask the headmaster to make all the girls wear miniski— BLUARGH!”

Three sets of spells from three girls slammed into the poor boys. Their pendants popped immediately, and pale white bubbles formed over their twitching bodies.

“Just... the worst.”

“Enemies of all women.”

“Gross.”

Their frigid gazes then shifted over to Sain. Alicia, in particular, fixed him with a spine-chilling glare.

“Saaaaain?” she asked in the kind of long, drawn-out tone parents used toward misbehaving children. “How come you didn’t cast any spells just now, hmmm?”

“W-Well, it was all so sudden and, I mean, I was just surprised that... Wh-What’s with that look?! Don’t overthink this, okay? I didn’t mean anything by that!”

His voice grew more flustered as he spoke, which certainly didn’t help his

case. In the end, he was forced to resume their camp-building under the contemptuous, distrustful gazes of his teammates.

“By the way, Sain. What was that spell you just used?” asked Marni as they were working on the roof.

“Wh-What do you mean? It was the spell you taught—”

“Because I definitely don’t remember teaching you such a sorry excuse for a spell.”

“Eep!”

Marni was, in general, not a very expressive person. Possibly due to all the time they’d spent together, however, Sain was starting to pick up on the subtle cues that gave away her mood. And right now, she was *very* angry.

“Tonight, we’re training.”

“T-Tonight?! But we’re in the middle of the field exer—”

“It doesn’t matter. As your mentor, I can’t have my apprentice embarrassing us every time he uses magic.”

In the end, Marni followed through with her plan.

While setting up a base camp would normally be a challenging endeavor, they had access to magic, which made the process far smoother. Thick branches were used to make the frame of the cabin, and broad leaves were placed on top of each other to form the roof. With plenty of time left to spare, they even managed to put up a few simple beds. Their creations were crude and unlikely to last very long, but with careful use, they should hold for a while. In the coming days, they could slowly work to improve their creations’ sturdiness.

Food acquisition was easy as well, as the river harbored fish. They considered making fishing rods, but ultimately, Melia and Marni went with the old tried-and-true method of catching fish with their hands — their large, water-and-darkness-infused *Halden* hands.

“You’re too slow.”

“Ugh!”

Sain grunted as he desperately tried to avoid the *Darkus* Marni shot at him. His stomach churned violently, threatening to eject its contents out his throat. He tasted his dinner again and winced. They'd grilled the fish Melia and Marni had caught over a fire Alicia had started using timber she'd gathered. While it hadn't been as tasty as the cafeteria food they normally ate, effort and labor proved to be surprisingly effective spices, and he'd found their hand-crafted dinner quite delectable. He didn't want to keep swallowing it over and over, however. It tasted far worse after the first passage down his throat.

"*Dark Ra—*"

"Too slow."

"Augh!"

Her dark projectile hit him on the forehead. She'd held back, but the impact was still enough to knock the sense out of him for a few seconds. Meanwhile, his magic was far from ready, and while dealing with the pressure of a real battle, his failure rate had increased significantly. The only solution was to gain more experience, so the mock battle took up most of their training today.

"We'll stop here for today... Any more will hurt your performance tomorrow," announced Marni in a cool, distant voice.

She'd barely finished her sentence before Sain collapsed onto the ground.

"...Geez. Is this what it's always like for you two?" said Alicia with a grimace.

"I went easier on him today than usual. If this wasn't the field exercises, we'd be doing this for another two hours."

Alicia's grimace twisted further as she sucked in a breath. Marni wasn't lying, though; their usual mock battles had been much more grueling than the one today.

"The bath is ready!"

Melia's voice came from the direction of the base camp. She'd crafted a big tub using earth magic, instilling in her teammates a newfound appreciation for fivekind and the conveniences they conferred.

"This should be obvious, but I'm just going to remind you that we're going to

be *very* upset if you attempt to peek.”

“Hah... Do I look like I’m in any condition to do so?”

“...I guess not. Just stay there, then. I think you need the rest, anyway.”

Alicia looked down at Sain, who was sprawled on his back, with a certain amount of pity before she walked away. Marni followed after her.



While the girls were enjoying their bath, Sain lay there on the ground, feeling the cold earth against his back, as he gazed vacantly up at the night sky.

“Have I gotten stronger? It’d be nice if I have... Sure would be nice...”

He reached up, his hand a dark silhouette against the canopy, and made a grabbing motion. Unsurprisingly, he felt nothing in his hands but empty air. Everything he’d done so far... had felt just like that motion. There was the effort. The attempt. But no results seemed to follow. Compared to his friends, he simply didn’t feel like he was making any progress. Perhaps they were just absurdly strong for their age — which, to be fair, they were — and were distorting his sense of scale. He was definitely getting better at controlling magic... but strength was relative. It’d be meaningless if his progress was only evident when measured against himself.

“Sain.”

After a while, he heard a voice behind him. He sat up and, lacking the willpower to attempt a full rotation of his body, simply craned his neck to look backward.

“Miss Grim? That was fast.”

“I want to talk to you for a bit.”

She sat herself down beside him, and the two of them looked up at the night sky, neither saying a word. Eventually, she broke the silence.

“How did you become friends with Alicia?”

“...She hasn’t told you anything?”

“She said it’d be better if I asked you directly.”

It seemed like the kind of question that was definitely better answered by Alicia, but perhaps she didn’t feel comfortable telling the story.

“Well then. It’s a long story, so you’d better get comfortable if you want to hear it...”

After giving ample warning, Sain launched into the tale of his past month. He spoke of the labyrinth in the Origin Spire, where they searched for the holy

sword that would enhance the wielder's light magic. He described their discovery of the fake holy sword and the Chaos that hid within. His tone got a little heavier as his story approached its climax, wherein Alicia took the tainted sword, fell under the influence of Chaos, and could only be saved by becoming an attendant of the holy knight. Finally, he closed with Alicia's awakening to her special power of holy fire, which allowed her to rid herself of the label of "loser" that had plagued her throughout her life.

Having finished recounting the events of the past month, he stopped and took a breath.

"Holy fire... Alicia had been troubled by a power she was born with, too, huh," Marni said softly after hearing the whole story.

Being born a dark elf, she'd endured her fair share of hardship as well. Alicia's suffering must have resonated with her to some degree.

"You approached her and stayed by her side, all through her struggles. And then, you even saved her. From others... and herself."

She regarded him with solemn admiration.

"...No. My actions were hardly as noble as you make them seem. I simply did what I could to help a friend. Nothing more," he replied, feeling a little embarrassed by the height of the pedestal she'd placed him on.

"I see why Alicia fell for you. I don't blame her."

"She *what*?!"

Sain jumped to his feet. Or, he would have, if they hadn't immediately given out under him, resulting in an awkward floundering motion that was unseemly but at least conveyed his surprise.

"D-Did she tell you that?"

"Yes... She also mentioned that she's still waiting on your answer to her confession."

Apparently, the bath they'd taken together had facilitated some very frank conversations. He scratched the back of his head and said in a soft voice, "Yeah... I'm just... I want to stay focused on becoming the dark knight right

now.”

He’d told Alicia as much, and she’d expressed understanding, saying she’d try her best in the meantime to keep things the same between them. That didn’t stop her jealous side from rearing its head every so often, though. It wasn’t that he didn’t feel guilty about leaving her hanging, exactly. He was, however, also honest about wanting to stay focused on his goal of becoming the dark knight. He had very little experience and not even a lick of talent. For someone like him to outpace all other contenders — many of whom were far better positioned than him — and reach the finish line first, he needed to prioritize. And that meant making sacrifices. Things that weren’t at the top of the list simply had to go.

“That reminds me. You know how you give everyone nicknames? That’s because of your power as the holy knight, right?”

“Yeah. If I call someone by their real name, I’ll end up infusing them with my power. Apparently, my compatibility with the holy knight’s power is better than that of my predecessors’... It’s nice when I’m on the job, but I can’t turn it off, so it can be a real nuisance in everyday life.”

Only after he offered his explanation did it occur to him that Marni was the only member of his team he didn’t call by name. Alicia and Melia were both his attendants already, so when necessary, he could say their names without fear of irreversible consequences. While it wasn’t intentional, and there were certainly extenuating circumstances, the effect was nevertheless that he’d been singling her out. Given her upbringing as a dark elf, she was probably extra sensitive to being alienated.

“Sorry. I wasn’t avoiding your name on purpose. Well, I mean, it was on purpose, but like—”

“It’s fine,” Marni said, shaking her head. “I’m your mentor... You’ve got a long way to go before you’ve got any business calling me by name.”

She smiled. While she didn’t quite succeed in making it look natural, he took the hint and let the matter rest. If she’d come to terms with it, then who was he to say otherwise?

“...I guess you’re right.”

“I’m glad I took you as my apprentice, Sain,” she continued. “You learned, and you got stronger. Much stronger than I’d ever expected. You’ve done your mentor proud.”

“...Have I? It doesn’t feel like it to me.”

“You’re just not aware of your own progress. Granted, you’ve still got a ways to go, but the amount of improvement you’ve shown this past month has been incredible... If you just keep at it, I think you’re really going to start turning some heads. Honest.”

Then, she regarded him with a more solemn look.

“The third principle of dark magic: never give up.”

“...That got cheesy, fast. And yes, I recognize the irony of that statement coming from me.”

“It might sound cheesy, sure, but there is merit to it. Learning dark magic is hard, which means lots of people give up halfway. It’s rare to find someone who’s serious about trying to master it. That’s why the principle exists. As both a warning, and as encouragement... But I guess you didn’t even need to hear it.”

Sain raised an eyebrow at her final sentence, but he continued to listen.

“You practiced your heart out, shedding sweat and blood day after day. It was hard, and it was painful, but you just kept going. You’re lightkind, but you met that natural handicap with twice the passion and drive. The way you soldier on... It’s not something anyone can do. It really isn’t. And yet, I can’t imagine you giving up halfway at all.”

“...Thank you. I, too, am glad to have become your apprentice, Miss Grim.”

The evening wind whistled in their ears, and Marni — perhaps feeling its chill — huddled closer to Sain.

The next morning, the team rose from their makeshift beds and made their way to the river to wash their faces and discuss their plans for the day.

“As long as we have this base camp, we won’t have to worry too much about food. Which means... we should start focusing on defending ourselves from attacks by other teams,” said Alicia.

“We could also take the initiative and raid them first,” suggested Melia.

“Hmm, good point, but...” She frowned and looked at Sain. “Hey, you said the Eldis twins tried to get under your skin before the event started, right?”

“Yeah. I’m not sure if that was their intention, but we should assume there’s a good chance they’ll come pick a fight with us.”

“Then we can probably afford to sit and wait for a while. We don’t want to get into a fight with some other team, and then have the twins show up right when we’re exhausted. Besides, while we’ve loaded up on water and rations, and had a good sleep last night, I’ll bet there are plenty of teams having trouble with basic survival. Five days in, they’ll probably start dropping out all by themselves.”

Melia nodded.

“True... In that case, we’d be better off staying put and conserving our strength.”

“The five points we get for lasting the full ten days is big. No matter how hard we work during the event, if we end up dropping out before it’s done, we lose those five points. It’s important to defeat the other teams, of course, but I think we should focus on surviving until the end.”

The field exercises were one of the bigger school events, and having attended Jenifa through her junior division days, Alicia knew the tricks to winning first place.

“Teams that have trouble being self-sufficient are likely going to try raiding other teams, so we just have to focus on fending them off,” Marni concluded. Like Alicia, she’d attended the junior division here as well.

Just then, there was a sound from the thickets.

“Is that... a chimera?” Sain asked softly.

A monster, which Sain had correctly identified as a chimera, appeared out of the brush. It had the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a venomous snake. The creature walked on all fours, and it was viciously aggressive.

“And the big nasty monster would like to remind us that there’s one more threat we forgot to bring up,” quipped Melia.

Indeed, opposing teams weren’t the only threat in the field exercises. The forest was home to all kinds of dangerous monsters.

“We can’t have it messing up our encampment. Let’s take it down!”

At Alicia’s word, they all readied themselves to fight. She struck first.

“Great torrent of fire, turn all into ashen seas — Velle Flaram!”

A wave of white fire rolled over the creature. While she’d learned to tweak its properties, by default, Alicia’s magic was only effective against monsters. In a way, this could be considered a significant advantage, as it didn’t risk setting the whole forest on fire. If she needed to hit human targets, she’d have to turn it into regular flames, but against monsters, she could use pure holy fire.

“It’s not enough! Marni! Give me a hand!” shouted Alicia as she kept her spell going.

“Okay.” Her reply was terse. *“Dark Ray!”*

The bolt of darkness that materialized before her shot forward with blinding speed, lancing straight through the monster’s cranium and continuing out the other side. It was deadly and efficient — unbridled destruction pared down to its purest form and condensed into the shape of a spear. The big creature was dead before it hit the ground.

The spell was strong. So amazingly strong. If only he could master it, Sain thought, he’d be so much closer to becoming the dark knight.

“Huh. That was easier than I’d expected.”

The tension seeped from Alicia’s shoulders and she breathed out in relief. The sound of her breath coincided with the thud of a windy missile making contact with Sain’s chest.

“Oomph!”

“Sain?!”

“I-I’m fine!”

He'd pivoted just in time to soften the blow and get away with little more than a grunt of pain. Looking over in the direction of the shot, they saw a team of four students — two boys and two girls — appear behind the fallen chimera.

"So, they think they're smart, timing their attack right after the chimera showed up," Alicia said with a bold grin as she turned to face them.

Their opponents had already prepared their spells and were about to fire them off. Melia reacted immediately.

"For now, I'll make sure they stay put. *Londo Mysteria!*"

Mist appeared out of nowhere and quickly filled the area. They began to hear confused yelling from the other team.

"Sain! Move up! I'll support you when necessary!"

"Got it!"

Melia dispersed only the mist surrounding Sain, allowing him to move freely. Those whose vision was still obfuscated had to stay in place, as running blind across the uneven terrain would risk a fatal stumble.

"*Darku!*"

"Ugh!"

Sain's dark missile stuck a nearby enemy in the stomach, but it was quickly shrugged off, accomplishing little.

"Hey, you." One of the boys spoke to him through the mist. "Some friendly advice. Don't count on a dark elf to have your back. You'll regret it."

"...What?" Sain snarled.

"They're a race of murderers. I don't know how you're comfortable teaming up with one of them."

The second boy's voice rang out from the mist.

"You never know when they'll stab you in the back. I'd be careful, if I were you."

They were almost certainly speaking loudly enough for the rest of his team — Alicia, Melia, and of course Marni — to hear. In response, Sain scoffed. He put

some emphasis behind it, too.

“Hmph. What rubbish.”

It had been about a month since he’d met Marni, and they’d spent a significant chunk of that time getting to know each other. A few hostile remarks weren’t going to shake his trust.

“If you’re trying to shake up our teamwork, then let me tell you that it’s having the exact opposite effect.”

The boys’ taunting failed to sow the seeds of doubt amongst Sain and his friends. It only earned their anger. Melia’s *Worta Halden* broke their formation, giving Sain and Alicia a chance to strike. Split into two groups by the assault, their opponents tried to get behind them to counterattack.

“Miss Grim! I’m counting on you to cover my back!”

Ignoring the enemies circling around him, Sain attacked a boy in front of him with *Darku*, who barely managed to dodge it. The boy was not so lucky for the follow-up *Flagus* from Alicia, which left him enbubbled.

“Great torrent of darkness, drown the land in seas of black — Velle Darku!”

Behind Sain, Marni cast a large-scale spell, sending a raven-black wave through the snow-white mist. The two girls trying to get behind him were swallowed by the rolling darkness, and their pendants popped together. The wave kept surging forward, reaching to within an inch of Sain before splitting around him. Under Marni’s watchful eye, no spell of hers was going to harm Sain by accident.

“There’s only one of them left! Don’t let him get away or we’ll lose the point!” shouted Alicia as she pointed at the final, retreating member of the enemy team.

Sain rushed to cast a spell, but...

“Gah!”

...He could do little but watch as a block of earth slammed into the boy right in front of his eyes.

“Looks like somebody’s leaving food on his plate, isn’t he, Sain Fostess?”

A boy, all flaming red hair and ferocious grin, appeared from the woods. Behind him, a girl similarly hued in both hair and attitude, soon followed with their other two teammates.

“The Eldis twins...”

Sain mentally put aside the battle they just fought, refreshing his mind for the new one at hand. This would take every last ounce of his concentration, for the contenders for first place — the team of Rayde and Yuria — had just taken the stage.

“E-Everyone, back up! We have to regroup—”

“You wish. *Grund Shot!*”

Alicia’s urgent instruction was cut short by Rayde’s attack. He drove his foot into the ground. A split second later, the earth around it flew up in a heap and congealed into multiple pellets that fired themselves at Sain in scattershot fashion.

Sain barely had time to react before the pellets reached him. One of them grazed his cheek. He felt almost no pain, but a tiny crack appeared on his pendant.

“Sain!”

“I-It’s okay! I’m fine!” he shouted to reassure an alarmed Alicia.

Meanwhile, the Eldis twins had already closed the distance. Faced with the menace of the incoming duo, he grimaced.

“Miss Grim and I will handle the twins! My maid and Miss Gold can take care of the other two!” he shouted.

“Ahh! Whatever! I’m trusting you!” Alicia shouted back from a distance.

She put up a blanket of white flame that separated the twins from their two teammates. Rayde glanced at the burning barrier and smirked, as though he found it amusing.

“I didn’t expect you to show up so soon,” said Sain, tsking with dismay at how confident the red-haired boy seemed.

Rayde shrugged.

“I’d rather not wait until everyone’s tired and worn out. I want to fight when we’re all at a hundred percent.”

Being the warmongering maniac he was, he apparently had a particular preference for the state of his opponents as well.

“Alchemia!”

At his command, the ground at his feet swelled up, eventually taking the shape of a sword that floated in front of him. He grabbed the handle and charged at Sain, who rushed to draw his own black sword. The two blades clashed with a harsh, metallic screech.

“Oh? What’s this? You know your way around swords, too?” said Rayde.

“I dabble a bit,” Sain answered.

When in holy knight mode, Sain mostly used a sword, albeit an immaterial one of light created by a spell. He hadn’t received any formal training, so when it came to raw swordsmanship, he was at a disadvantage.

“So... I hear you’re aiming for first place, too?” Sain asked, as though trying to distract from the fact that he was on the back foot.

“Sure. Not that I care much for the prize, mind you. But if we win, I’m gonna ask the headmaster to put us in a third-year class.” He broke off the clash and backed up a step before continuing. “You heard of Cain Theresia? Yeah... Of course you have. See, our good student council president is in his third year of the intermediate division, which puts him two years above us. I’ve known him since my junior days, and I’ve never beaten him. I fought him over and over, and sometimes, I feel like I’m getting close, but I always end up losing... Back then, I had plenty of chances to challenge him, but after he became an intermediate, he started refusing to fight me. Ever since then, I’ve felt this hole in me... and it’s agonizing. You know what I’m talking about?”

“I see. So you want to have a chance to challenge that man in combat, and therefore, you wish to become a third-year student like him.”

“That’s right. If we’re in the same class, then there’ll be more events like

these field exercises where I can fight him. He can refuse my personal challenges, but he can't skip a school event, now, can he?"

In a place like the Jenifa Royal Magic Academy, that prided itself on rewarding merit, Rayde was arguably a model student. His thirst to become stronger was incredible, if not bordering on outright insanity.

"Let's keep the banter to a minimum, now, Rayde," said a girl's voice.

Yuria appeared behind her brother. She fixed Sain with the same dark glare as before.

"All right," said Rayde. "Let's do this, Sain. Don't wimp out on me, now. Remember all those things you said to me in school? Well, now's your chance to prove you meant it."

If that was meant as a taunt, it worked. Sain's eyes flared. When Rayde had first shown up, he'd called Marni a coward. He was wrong. Marni was absolutely not a coward, or a person who couldn't do anything on her own, and Sain was going to make the belligerent Eldis take back what he'd said.

Rayde brandished his sword, and Sain hopped back a few steps to make some distance.

"Sain, can you buy us some time?"

Marni's whisper sounded in his ear. He'd been so focused on Rayde that he hadn't noticed her approaching.

"...How long?" he whispered back.

"Three minutes. Keep them busy for that long, and I'll finish off both of them."

Two Eldises for three minutes of work. That sounded like a steal.

"Understood. Leave it to me."

Marni had, after all, once claimed that she could take first place in the field exercises all by herself. Initially, he'd assumed it was a boast, but after a month's worth of first-hand experience, he reconsidered his opinion. She might actually be right. Rayde, meanwhile, saw her as a pushover.

Three minutes.

If he could hold them off for three minutes, he'd be able to show them how wrong they were about Marni.

"Darku!"

Sain let his signature spell fly.

"Whoa, whoa, are you serious? Beginner-level magic? In a situation like this?"

Rayde stepped out of the way with ease, inserting a twirling flourish in his motion just to drive home the point.

"Crucible of swirling mud, swallow the sinking earth — Mud Grail!"

The incantation came from Yuria, who pressed her hands onto the earth. Immediately, the ground below Sain's feet began to soften. It grew wetter and wetter until it gave way under his weight, and he began to sink.

"This is... turning into a swamp?!"

The spell worked exactly as the report had described. Yuria was a fivekind specializing in compound magic that used water and earth. He'd been on guard for it, but in the heat of the moment, he still failed to evade it.

"I know you think you've got some sort of plan, but it's not going to work. We won't be stopped by a loser like you."

"Gah! Damn this mud!"

Rayde dashed toward the immobilized Sain. At the same time, a dagger flashed out, tracing a short, tight arc across where Yuria's neck would have been had she not quickly leaped backward. A figure then landed nearby, her maid uniform fluttering in the breeze. Yuria tsked as the swamp ensnaring Sain reverted to normal earth.

"Are you okay?" asked Melia as Sain hastily backed away from the oncoming Rayde.

"M-Maid?! Why are you here?! What happened to Miss Gold?!"

"She's probably fine on her own over there, so I figured I'd come lend a hand."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the wall of white flame flaring up as she spoke. He was worried about Alicia, but he could definitely do with some help from Melia right now. After a moment's hesitation, he nodded.

"Maid! Buy some time for Miss Grim!"

"...All right. I see what the plan is."

Her eyes flashed with comprehension, and she held her hands out to her side.

"Sprites of crystalline veil, roam the endless mist — Londo Mysteria!"

Fire and water mixed, producing the thick white mist of her signature spell. It quickly engulfed everything around them.

Rayde tsked.

"Now that's a pain."

"It's only a distraction," replied Yuria. "It can't do much else— Kyaa?!"

She was entirely unprepared to have the maid suddenly appear beside her like that. Being a master of mist magic, Melia was naturally used to fighting in it, as well. She could read the changes in air currents and shadows to extrapolate the locations of her foes. Her attack forced the younger Eldis to escape from the enshrouded area.

"Master Sain, your turn."

"I know! *Darku!*"

He took aim at the vulnerable figure of Yuria just as she emerged from the mist. It hit her, and he heard her pendant crack a little.

"You insolent little—"

She couldn't finish her sentence, as Sain was already charging at her with his sword raised. He slashed at her, and she'd had just enough time to produce her own sword, using the same *Alchemia* spell as her brother, and meet his swing. They clashed.

"You can call me a loser, and maybe you're right... But my friends aren't."

"Th-That's not your own strength!"

“It’s not. But it’s *a* strength, and that’s what matters!”

As they pushed against each other with their blades, Sain felt a powerful surge of magical energy behind him. It looked like the Marni Cannon was finally ready to fire. He quickly hopped away to distance himself from Yuria.

“Dormant darkness, vagrant and lost, roar in resonance with the twilight black...” In a tone steady but eerily ominous, she spoke the words of her incantation. *“Seize the plaques of names sequential, swear your soul upon the clock tower ruined... Opulence shattered, its dirge composed, rise from the bedrock of your tomb...”*

The earth itself darkened, as though dyed in shadow, and a paralyzing chill ran up Sain’s spine. His hair stood on end. He could feel the goosebumps on his skin. No one moved. For a long moment, Marni’s voice alone marked the passage of time. Then, her long, foreboding incantation ended, and her colossal spell was complete.

“Aun Grohlis!”

From the blackened ground rose a pair of gigantic arms. Two massive hands pressed down, depressing the earth as the head and torso of a mountainous titan emerged from the shadowy crater. It let out a terrible roar before fixing its massive eyes on Rayde.

“Oh shit... What the hell is this spell?! *V-Velle Flaram!*”

He sent a wave of fire surging at the dark titan, only for it to be extinguished by the swirling mass of darkness that surrounded the towering figure. Trees, bushes, and even the very earth surrounding the titan turned black and began to disintegrate, suggesting it had the power to break down whatever it touched.

“You’ve... got to be kidding me. How the hell do you stop this thi—”

Marni had only one word for the flustered Eldis.

“Goodbye,” she said in an icy voice before the titan swept its massive arm across the ground. Rayde — along with a significant chunk of the surrounding forest — disappeared in a thunderous squall of destruction.

Yuria stared at the spot where her brother had stood just a second ago. There

was nothing left but barren earth. A drop of cold sweat rolled down her forehead.

“All right... In that case...” She held out her hands. Not up in surrender, but forward in defiance. “Looks like I’ll have to do this myself, then!”

She wasn’t giving up. Her back was against the wall, but her will was unbroken. Magical energy gathered in her palms. Just as she was about to cast a spell, however, there was a deafening roar that caused them all to freeze. It wasn’t from the titan. This was something more... beastly.

“...What was that?”

As if in answer, there was a rustling sound from the direction that Rayde had been sent flying. Their heads all snapped toward it. A second later, a large, leonine monster appeared. Sharp fangs protruded from its thick jaw, and they looked strong enough to crush bone.

“A blast tiger?! Th-They didn’t say blast tigers would show up around here!” Yuria shrieked in confusion.

Sain had heard of them before. Blast tigers were ferocious monsters with a voracious appetite for both animals and people. They had tough, powerful bodies that allowed them to adapt to many different environments, and their teeth excreted a special fluid that dripped out of the tips. This fluid was combustible, and by grinding their teeth together, they could produce explosions from their mouths. While hunting, blast tigers would first hold their prey in their teeth, and then rub them together to produce an explosion, before gathering the fragments of the broken carcass and eating them at its leisure.

The blast tiger looked at the person standing closest to it, which happened to be Yuria.

“Eek?!”

Two beastly eyes, each the size of a human head, fixed themselves on her, and her face paled immediately. The bluster she’d displayed was gone without a trace, replaced by an uncontrollable shaking in her arms and legs. She started to back away, but in her panic, she tripped on a protruding root and fell on her rear.

“Ahh... Ahhhh...”

Before he knew it, Sain was dashing to her aid. One look at the expression of pure terror on her face was all he needed to spring into action.

“Darku!”

He launched a dark missile at the blast tiger, striking it in the eye. The monster howled in pain and stumbled backward a few steps. In that time, Sain dashed in and swooped the cowering Yuria up in his arms.

“Wha—?!”

She struggled a little in surprise, but he held her tightly, supporting her neck and knees as he made his escape.

“Miss Grim!”

“On it.”

Not missing a beat, Marni directed the dark titan, Aun Grohlis, to swing its massive arm at the blast tiger. The strike connected, sending the monster slamming into a tree trunk, but it immediately got back on its feet and charged the titan with a roar. It sank its fangs into the titan’s head and produced an explosion. The powerful blast rocked the ground, causing everyone to recoil — everyone except Marni, who didn’t even flinch. She softly whispered two words.

“Crush it.”

One enormous fist fell upon the blast tiger like a hammer, shaking the ground a second time with a thunderous quake. When the fist lifted from the deep crater, only a flattened carcass remained inside. The titan began to crumble, breaking into tiny particles from the outside in. That final blow had likely consumed all of its energy.

“Why...” asked Yuria, still cradled in a princess carry. “Why are you helping me?”

Sain gave the question some thought before answering.

“If I had to give an answer... it would be because you looked like you were scared.”

She stiffened at his response, her cheeks flushing with color as he set her down. Soon after, Melia approached from behind with a dagger brandished in her right hand. She took Yuria's pendant and, as though it were the most natural thing, drove her blade into it, shattering it immediately.

"Oh, don't mind me," she quipped casually. "Just taking care of unfinished business. It's the maid's job to clean up after her master, after all."

With her pendant destroyed, the familiar pale blue barrier deployed around the younger Eldis.

"Let's go help Alicia," suggested Marni as she joined them.

Sain nodded, and they ran off, leaving Yuria in the safety of her protective bubble. As they moved, Melia gave him a questioning glare.

"So, Master Sain, why *did* you help Miss Yuria?"

"Hnnnngh, I-like I said, it's be—"

"She had the pendant, you know."

"Becau—"

"She had the pendant, you know."

"All right, all right! I forgot, okay? I remembered after I helped her!"

His face reddened with his confession. In hindsight, with the protection of the substitute pendant, Yuria was never in any danger of dying, even if she had been attacked by the blast tiger. In the heat of the moment, however, this fact had completely slipped his mind, and he'd acted without thinking. As a result, he had to endure Melia's mockery all the way until she reached Alicia.

With the destruction of her substitute pendant signaling the end of her participation in the event, Yuria eventually got up and wandered through the forest, looking for her brother.

"Yo."

She heard a voice from above. Looking up, she discovered Rayde dangling upside down from the treetops, his legs caught in a mess of branches.

"Well. That's a very... acrobatic way to greet someone."

“I’m not doing this for fun. I just woke up and found myself like this.”

“Figures. You went flying a good distance, after all.”

He pulled himself free and landed on the ground. The same pale blue barrier surrounded him as well, suggesting he’d been downed by that one titanic strike from Marni’s spell-made titan.

“...Well, I guess we lost.”

“...Yes.”

At first, they seemed downcast, their voices subdued in acknowledgment of their defeat. Then, they looked up at the sky. Their eyes were distant and a little glassy, and a hint of reverence entered their tone.

“...Beautiful,” whispered Rayde.

“Yes... Very much so,” replied Yuria.

Their feelings were in concert, but the object of their worship differed. Rayde thought of Marni, while Yuria saw Sain. The twins’ had always been focused on fighting — more specifically, winning. Their obsession with obtaining victory was so intense that the people at school had dubbed them ‘the Muscle-Brained Twins.’ For them, their encounter with Sain and Marni had shaken them to the core.

“Yuria. Looks like we’ve got a lot more training to do.”

“Yes. It appears that the strength we’ve been pursuing is but one of many... They have a kind of strength we do not.”

The pair shared a moment of mutual reflection.

“...Let’s try to regroup. The other two have probably been downed already, but we might as well go find them,” said Rayde as he started to walk off.

Yuria was just about to follow when she sensed an unnerving presence nearby. She turned toward it.

“What... is that?” she murmured with a frown.

Rayde had stopped as well. He looked in the same direction.

“No idea. I’ve never seen a monster like that...”

They narrowed their eyes, gazing suspiciously past the trunks and leaves at the strange, misshapen figure of a blood-red monster.

Sain rushed to Alicia's aid, only to discover that his help was entirely unnecessary. As Melia had predicted, upon arriving, he found pale blue barriers surrounding the two students who'd been Alicia's opponents. Seeing that the battle was done, the four members of Sain's team made their way back to their camp to reinforce the cabin roof and walls.

As night fell, they grilled some fish for dinner before enjoying some casual banter around their campfire. Alicia, in particular, was in good spirits following their victory.

"We are so lucky! It's only the second day, and we just took out one of the favorites to win! We're on a roll!"

Sain concurred. Luck was definitely on their side. Their team had two points now. Already two points. But also only two points. There were eight more days left in the event, and the fighting was only going to intensify. It would be in their best interests to keep themselves well-rested and on guard. Then, without warning, he spun around and stared out into the darkness behind them.

"Sain? What's wrong?" asked Alicia.

"I... I thought I sensed something weird just now..."

He focused again, but the peculiar sensation was nowhere to be found. Figuring it was just him, he turned back toward the campfire. Eventually, it was time to sleep.

At night, forests were dark places. With leaves and branches blocking most of the moonlight, there were times when even the ground underfoot was shrouded in shadows. Figuring that none of the other teams would try to move around during these dimmest hours of the night, the four of them relaxed as they got into their respective beds. Soon, the soft, rhythmic breathing of peaceful slumber permeated the camp.

Except... it didn't come from everyone.

"Where are you going?"

A voice, its volume magnified by the surrounding silence, echoed in the darkness. Marni stopped at the boundary between the camp and the forest. She turned around to find two of their beds empty. One was, of course, hers. The other belonged to Sain.

“I’m going to do some patrolling. Even if people are asleep, monsters might be nearby,” she answered.

“Then allow me to accompany you,” said Sain, who approached her from behind the cabin.

“There’s no need. I’m used to walking around at night, and it’s probably easier to stay hidden if I’m by myself.”

He frowned at her, concern written plainly on his face. Something about the look struck a chord with her, and her impassive expression gave way to a smile.

“Get an ego check. You’re still the apprentice. You’ve got no business worrying about your master. Besides, you worked really hard today, so you should be exhausted. Get some rest. We’ll need you in good shape for tomorrow.”

“...Fine. Don’t do anything too risky, though.”

After watching Sain reluctantly return to the camp, Marni stepped into the forest. Being a dark elf, her eyes were unaffected by darkness, which gave her a significant edge in the field exercises. Under conditions where normal people couldn’t see more than a few inches in front of their face, her vision was as clear as if she were in bright daylight. Even if she ran into nocturnal monsters, she was perfectly capable of fighting them.

“...Good. It doesn’t look like there are any dangerous monsters around here.”

Water was the source of life for more than just humans. In general, where there was water, there were lots of monsters, as well. Fortunately, though their encampment was by the river, it didn’t seem to be a spot that monsters usually frequented for water. After deciding that their perimeter was safe, she was just about to start heading back to camp when she heard a voice.

“Good evening, Marni.”

She turned to find a woman in a plain black cloak standing behind her.

“Who are you?”

“What do you mean? It’s me,” said the woman as she slid back her hood.

“Your sister, Harti.”

Rays of moonlight slipped through the treetops, illuminating her brown skin, long pointed ears, and the blood-red highlights of her silver hair. The woman was undoubtedly a dark elf and, as Marni’s widening eyes confirmed, a familiar face.

“It... can’t be... Harti?”

All the planning and practice... Winning first place at this event... It was so she could search for her lost sister. And now, there she was. Harti.

“How? Is it... really you?”

“Of course it’s me. Do I look any different to y—” Harti paused before letting out a short laugh. “I guess I do. It’s been two years since we last saw each other, after all.”

Everything, from her voice, to her face, to her mannerisms... It was all exactly as Marni remembered. The woman standing before her was indeed Harti. With slow, unsteady steps, she approached her sister. Halfway there, however, she stopped.

“...Where have you been all this time?”

“Really? It’s our long-awaited reunion and *that’s* what you want to do first? Ask questions? No hugs or anything?”

“Answer me. I... I kept looking for you. All this time.”

Marni’s voice — and in fact, her whole body — trembled as she spoke. Her thoughts were in disarray, thrown into utter chaos by the sudden appearance of the person she’d spent the last two years searching for. There was joy, of course; she was happy to see her sister again. But there was more.

Where have you been?

What were you doing?

A tempest of emotions raged inside her, wild and confusing. One in particular was red-hot and bubbled to the surface. It was anger.

Why did you leave me?

"I apologize for not getting in touch with you. It's not that I didn't want to, but I was busy."

"...Busy?"

Harti nodded.

"I was searching, as well. For a place where we belong. A place where even we dark elves can enjoy peace and well-being," she said as she began walking toward Marni, closing the remaining distance between them. "And the reason I've appeared before you today, Marni, is to bring you there. Come... Take this."

Marni's sister reached into her cloak and produced something that looked like a blood-red gem, which she held out toward her. It pulsed like a living heart. A single look at it was enough to elicit a visceral reaction of disgust, and Marni couldn't help but remember that she'd experienced a very similar sensation not long ago. It felt just like the monster that Sain had used his holy knight powers to defeat. She knew just what it was.

"...Chaos?" she whispered.

Harti's eyes went wide.

"Why do you know—"

"Miss Grim!"

An anxious voice echoed through the forest. They turned to find Sain staring at them, his expression tense. Alicia and Melia were behind him.

"You... Who are—" he said, glaring at Harti.

"Ah, we meet again. Thanks for giving me directions that time."

Her voice jolted his memory, and he suddenly recalled the encounter in the capital city when a woman had asked for directions to the west gate. She'd hidden her face then, but he could see it clearly now.

"You... It can't be... Miss Grim's sister?"

“You mean Marni’s? Yes, that’s me. My name is Harti. Shall we shake hands?”

Sain ground his teeth at the revelation.

“...That’s a pretty good imitation. How did you do it?”

“Imitation? What do you mean?”

“You know perfectly what I mean, *Chaos*. You’re part of them.”

“...I see. So you’re the one who told my dear sister about Chaos. Oh, well. Saves me time doing it myself, I guess.”

Harti looked from Marni to Sain.

“We are the Clan of Chaos, an organization that believes the world should be ruled by neither of the two gods, but Chaos itself. Chaos is our rightful god.” She took off the pendant that hung at her neck. “This is a magical seal for Chaos that the clan created. We can’t use the power of Chaos while we’re wearing it, but it allows us to hide its presence.”



Marni took a step backward.

“H-Harti...?” she said, caution creeping into her voice.

Why do you have something like that?

“Two years ago, I left the academy on an invitation from the clan,” said Harti as she held her sister’s gaze. “Marni, you know as well as I do that dark elves face rampant discrimination no matter where we go. Even in Jenifa, which prides itself on being a meritocracy, we were not spared the baseless condemnation that plagued us all our lives. I tried to shield you from it, Marni. I always tried to protect you... but I never stopped thinking. I thought and thought, wondering how we dark elves could live our lives in peace... And just when I was all out of answers, the clan came to recruit me to their cause. I’m sorry I left you, Marni, and I regret it to this day, but I needed to know. I needed to see for myself whether the clan’s claims truly held merit.

“Long story short, they were right. The Clan of Chaos is a gathering of outcasts and misfits — those for whom the world offered no sense of belonging. There, dark elves face no persecution. In fact, those like us are the very people the clan is trying to save. So put aside your worries, Marni, and join me. Take up the power of Chaos, and never again shall you suffer at the hands of prejudice. Come with me... and forever free yourself from the cursed fate of our race.”

Faced with her sister’s offer, Marni fell silent.

“Don’t let her trick you! Those tainted by Chaos can’t possibly hope to live a peaceful life!” yelled Sain.

“Sain’s right. That power... It’s too much. It’ll consume you.”

Alicia joined in as well. Having had a taste of Chaos just a month ago, her words carried the weight of experience.

“You...” Harti narrowed her eyes at Sain. “You’re no ordinary person, are you? You know too much.”

Before they could trade any more words, another man appeared from the forest.

“And here I was wondering what was taking you so long... No wonder. I see

we've got a pest problem on our hands."

He had dark red hair and amber eyes.

"Allow me to do the introductions," said Harti. "This is Iblis. Like me, he is a member of the Clan of Chaos... and in fact, it was him who asked me to join the clan two years ago."

Iblis gave no visible reaction as Harti introduced him. He cast a glance at Marni before regarding Sain, Melia, and Alicia in turn.

"The only one I want is your little sister there. Hurry up and kill the other three brats."

"Wait. It looks like those other kids know about Chaos. What if they're like that student president and have special powers—"

"Kill them."

The man named Iblis spoke right over Harti, as if he hadn't even heard her. At his command, a Beast of Chaos appeared and charged at Sain.

"Gah!"

He was sent flying as the Beast slammed into him. It pounced on him, fangs bared for the kill.

"Sain?!" screamed Alicia.

She tried to run after him, but she suddenly realized they were surrounded on all sides by Beasts. Some had wings like birds. Others resembled the blast tiger.

"I keep telling you, Harti, you're too soft. We kill all witnesses. That's the rule," said Iblis, his voice cold as ice.

Harti lowered her gaze. After a long pause, she nodded.

"...You're right. Sorry for the trouble."

Just then, an explosion of light roared outward, and the whole forest seemed to flash white for a second. Soon after, the body of the Beast that had chased after Sain traced a wide parabola through the air and landed next to Iblis.

"What the f—"

He reeled in shock, swearing as he frantically looked from the unmoving carcass toward the source of the light. When he saw the figure that appeared from the woods, however, he froze.

“...In the end, I have no choice but to rely on this power.”

Sain — devoid of his usual assortment of trinkets — was walking toward them. His white coat took on a silver sheen in the moonlight, and his blond hair seemed to glow. With his seals removed, his holy knight powers were fully unleashed, and he fixed Iblis with his azure gaze as he approached.

“No... No way...” To know of Chaos was to know its antithesis. Iblis’s eyes widened with realization. “The holy knight?! Damn it! What the hell is he doing here?!”

Sain made no reply, instead addressing his two attendants.

“Melia. Alicia.”

Their powers unleashed as well, the two girls called the names of their respective weapons.

“Siem Saevas, here I bear the attendant’s mark. Second gift — Holy Sinking Blade!”

A number of daggers made of pure light materialized around Melia.

“Poht Teurch, here I bear the attendant’s mark. Seventh gift — Holy Weaving Torch!”

Holy fire flared in a brilliant torch that took shape in Alicia’s hand.

Faced with not only the holy knight but two of his attendants, Harti’s expression darkened with concern.

“Color me surprised... I never thought the holy knight would be in a place like this, much less a student... You’re practically a different person than before. How did you do it? What’s the trick?”

“The same one you use, as a matter of fact. I also wear light-binding seals on a daily basis.”

“I see... It all makes sense now. The holy knight and his attendants. Of course

you'd know about Chaos. So? What's the deal? Is my little sister already one of your attendants?"

"...No, she's not."

"Oh, good. Then she still has a choice."

Harti turned back to Marni.

"Listen, Marni. Come with me."

"B-But..."

Marni looked uneasily at her friends, who of course gestured at her to stay. Chaos ruined lives. It was something that Sain knew better than anyone. He'd spent his life fighting Chaos, and he'd seen what they did to people.

Eventually, Harti sighed.

"I guess this isn't the kind of environment for making big life-changing decisions," she said before fixing her eyes on Sain. "You're being a nuisance, holy knight. Let me get rid of you first."

She threw her arm out, and her black cloak fluttered in the sudden gale.

Multiple shadows dashed through the darkness.

Sain imbued the black sword he'd brought for the field exercises with the blessing of the goddess. The blade immediately turned white and radiated a saintly glow. With its hilt held firmly in his hand, he charged toward Harti...

"Beasts, attack!" roared Iblis.

...Only to be pushed back by an onslaught of Beasts that rushed him at her partner's command. They came at him from multiple directions, sharp fangs gnashing at him both high and low. He dodged them with focused precision, keeping his movements as limited as possible.

"Augh! Cursed knight! Stop getting in our way!"

Iblis's angry yelling was matched by a howl from his Beasts, who assaulted Sain with increased intensity. A heavy impact sent him stumbling back, and the substitute pendant he wore around his neck shattered with a sharp crack. A pale blue barrier deployed around him.

“Be careful! The substitute pendant can’t negate the powers of Chaos!” he shouted as he fell to one knee, his voice strained. The sheer number of Beasts leaping at him was starting to pile together into a heap, threatening to crush him under their weight.

The substitution pendant worked by absorbing magical attacks in place of its wearer. However, it was only effective against normal magic. Chaos, which belonged to no magical genus, passed straight through.

Suddenly, a wave of brilliant white fire incinerated the pile of Beasts on him.

“Sain! We’ll take care of that guy and his freaky minions! You should go—”

“I know! I’ll do something about Miss Grim’s sister!”

Not missing a beat, he burst out of the smoldering ashes in a run, leaving the surrounding Beasts to Alicia and Melia. He stopped in front of Harti, his sword held ready. She threw her head back in a laugh.

“Do something? Are you too scared to say kill?”

“...You’re my friend’s sister. Killing you is my last option, and I want to avoid resorting to it if at all possible. Is there something wrong with that?”

“Really... The holy knight, huh. Now, aren’t you the compassionate one. Unlike your darker counterpart, that is.”

As they traded words, Sain kept his eyes on Harti, carefully studying her for an opening to strike. As Marni’s sister, she was also a dark elf. Her repertoire of dark magic, which would have been powerful enough under normal circumstances, would now be further amplified by the powers of Chaos.

“Orb of gloom, devour with shadow and darkness — Dardia!”

Harti made the first move, sending several large orbs of darkness flying at Sain from both sides, flanking him. He dodged them by leaping directly up into the air.

“Darku Shot!”

A barrage of dark pellets shot out of her palm, their lack of individual strength made up for by their speed of release. Her swift follow-up caught Sain at the apex of his jump. Being airborne, he had no way of avoiding her second attack.

Yet, his face showed no panic. As the dark pellets approached, he calmly spoke the holy word, “*Sanctuary.*”

Light rushed outward, permeating the air in an ever expanding globe. Harti’s spell-made pellets disintegrated as the barrier of light passed through them.

“The ability of the holy knight to imbue empty space itself with the blessing of the goddess... Sanctuary, huh. As long as he has that power, it looks like my weaker spells aren’t going to be much use,” Harti mused, calmly studying her opponent, all despite being in the midst of battle.

Sain did the same, glancing at the Beasts hiding in the vicinity to evaluate his own position.

There are a lot of them.

As fifth-generation Chaos, Beasts were devoid of all reason and intellect, which normally prevented them from moving around in packs. The fact that they were surrounding him in such numbers, then...

“I see... That man has the ability to control Beasts of Chaos.”

“Correct.” Harti laughed. “Iblis is a third-generation Senbou Kairai, the Thousand Puppets. His power is to control his minions. And...”

She fired off a dozen dark missiles in one go as she talked. With his holy knight powers active, Sain had little difficulty evading them, and they went flying into the woods behind. He noticed, however, that the bark of a tree grazed by the missiles had withered and fallen away.

“...I am a second-generation Meishu Tenrei. I’m sure you’re familiar with the Infernal Skylord’s power, holy knight?”

Sain tsked audibly. The Founder, Meishu Tenrei, was a massive bird-shaped monster whose power was the ability to inflict abnormal ailments on its victims. When in battle, Meishu Tenrei would scatter its countless feathers throughout the area, and anyone they touched would suffer all sorts of torturous agonies. That, however, wasn’t the problem that concerned him.

“A second-generation...”

“That’s right. I’m not trying to brag or anything, but I’m told that integration

at the second generation without complete disfigurement is a rare feat. Apparently, most attempts result in failure, and the candidate isn't of much use afterward."

Conversely, successful integration conferred enormous power on the individual. Second-generation Chaos weren't as powerful as the Founder itself, of course, but they were certainly the next strongest thing. Harti was not the kind of opponent he could leave for Alicia or Melia.

"...Meishu Tenrei should have been sealed away. How did you acquire its power?"

"Our clan has the tools to accomplish such feats. We can extract power from higher-ranking Chaos and concentrate it into something we call Seeds of Chaos. By using them, we can gain the powers of Chaos, as well. In fact, the thing that I showed Marni earlier is a Seed."

Sain stared at Harti. Everything she just said was entirely unheard of. He quickly glanced at Marni, who was curled up into a ball on the ground. The sudden development had clearly overwhelmed her, and she likely felt confused and lost, wondering who was right and whom she should trust. He wanted to console her, but he was sure Harti would allow no such thing. As if affirming his suspicion, the black-cloaked dark elf began casting another spell.

"You think I'll let you try that? Take this!"

Sain promptly charged forward and swung his sword at her, interrupting her spell and forcing her to dodge away.

"Keeping me on my toes, huh... That sword of yours does look painful..." murmured Harti as she kept her eyes on the glowing shape of Sain's blessed sword.

"Clan of Chaos, was it? What are you people trying to do? Tell me your goal," he demanded with a glare as the dark elf leaped backwards.

"Would you believe me if I said world peace?"

Her answer caught him off guard, and he paused.

"Like I said before, the Clan of Chaos is a gathering of outcasts and misfits.

This world is filled with people suffering from discrimination and persecution. They run from place to place, trying to escape the cruelty that surrounds them, but relief is rare indeed. At the end of their harrowing search for solace, they always happen upon Chaos. It is their final haven. The two gods grant power only to their own — she to the holy knight, and he to the dark knight. But Chaos is different. Chaos is an entity of equality, granting power to all who seek it. And all of them, once empowered, gain the ability to fight. To repel the tendrils of torment that reach for them.”

“...But it comes at a cost. The taint of Chaos is lasting. Those who fall under its influence will never live a normal life.”

“Perhaps we won’t. I admit that Chaos is no panacea. Challenges yet remain.”

Magical tools formed the basis of all modern life. From drinking water to indoor lighting, everything was fueled by the user’s magical energy. Those tainted by Chaos, however, experienced a corruption of their magical energy that distorted its nature, rendering it incompatible with the instruments of daily life. To take in Chaos was a permanent disengagement from society. There was no going back.

“But that’s why we’re going to change the world.” A grin crept across Harti’s lips. “Into one without those challenges. Our final goal is to release Chaos from the seals that confine it and have it permeate the world. In other words, we’re going to change the very systems that the world is built on, and make *them* conform to *us*.”

If the seals that kept Chaos locked away were broken and it were released into the world, all aspects of daily life would be fundamentally altered into ones based on Chaos. It would indeed make for a world well-suited to a clan that bore such a name. Before that happened, however, there would undoubtedly be a period of destruction, during which the whole world and its people would be subject to brutal selection pressures. In other words, mass casualties.

“Not everyone can successfully integrate with Chaos. What you’re doing will result in innumerable losses.”

Harti and Iblis seemed to have retained their sense of self, but when Alicia fell under the influence of Chaos last month, she’d almost completely lost herself in

it. And she was still one of the better examples. Those who lacked the mental fortitude to withstand the influence of Chaos were left as misshapen monsters, having lost not just their self-awareness but their very shapes, as well. The release of Chaos into the world would come at the cost of countless victims.

“They’re all necessary sacrifices. No matter the age or era, selection has always followed revolution. It’s a rule of history, isn’t it?” said Harti, her voice devoid of both guilt and sympathy for the sacrifices she spoke of.

“So that’s how you see it...” Having grasped the full picture of Harti’s envisioned future, Sain cast his glance downward. “All right.”

Then, he looked back up and, his eyes blazing with renewed resolve, said, “The last option it is, then.”

Harti recoiled before beginning to back off warily, sending forth a spell to create distance between them.

“Great torrent of darkness, drown the land in seas of black — Velle Darku!”

A torrent of darkness rushed at Sain, its strength and scale greatly enhanced by Meishu Tenrei’s power.

“It’ll kill you with a single touch! Let’s see what you do about this!” she shouted as her massive wave rolled forward, blackening the trees, grass, and ground in its path. Everything it passed began to rot and melt away.

The spell’s density was immense, and *Sanctuary* wasn’t going to stop its advance.

“Sain, let me use holy fire to—”

“No. There’s no need.”

He halted Alicia with a terse command. Then, he held out his right hand in front of him. Light magical energy gathered in his palm.

“Lighto!”

Pure, eye-searing light exploded from his right hand, washing over everything around him. The torrent of darkness vanished instantly, and the burst of purifying energy reached even the Beasts that Iblis controlled. Half a dozen of them disintegrated at once.

“What the— You’ve got to be kidding... Isn’t that supposed to be a beginner-level spell?!”

For once, Sain’s powers seemed to have exceeded Harti’s expectations. Her calm exterior finally cracked, and the sheen of cold sweat appeared on her forehead.

“There’s no escape for you.”

He rushed toward her as she began a panicked retreat.

“Wha— Damn it! *Dormant darkness, vagrant and lost, roar in resonance with the twilight black...*”

She began reciting an incantation as she ran. The words sounded familiar. They were the same as the titanic spell Marni had cast earlier.

“Seize the plaques of names sequential, swear your soul upon the clock tower ruined... Opulence shattered, its dirge composed, rise from the bedrock of your tomb — Aun Grohlis!”

A massive titan of pure darkness rose from the ground and loomed over Sain. Like *Dark Ray*, it was almost certainly an advanced-level spell — the kind that was brutally difficult to master. He wasn’t surprised to see it in her arsenal, though. She was, after all, Marni’s sister. But for all its size and menace, the titan failed to intimidate him.

“Begone, titan.”

He swung his blade of light, the motion swift and sure. A golden arc split the titan from head to toe, and it was gone before its knees even hit the ground, its massive form fizzling away into a quickly vanishing mist.

“...No way.”

A bead of sweat rolled down the side of Harti’s face and landed on the ground as she stared at the empty space her titan had occupied a moment ago.

“What the hell are you doing, Harti?! You’re second generation! At least keep him occup—”

“Hey, eyes over here! Your fight’s with us, buddy! *Flare!*”

Alicia launched an orb of holy fire at Iblis, who hastily threw a nearby Beast at it as a shield. As a result, a gap appeared in the formation of Beasts that were protecting him.

“Melia!”

The maid was in motion, twin daggers flashing in her hands, before the words even left Alicia’s mouth.

“Ugh, against two little girls...”

“Londo Mysteria!”

A thick swirl of white mist appeared around Melia, obscuring Iblis’s vision for a second. That second was all she needed.

“Graaaaargh!”

A silver flash severed the mist, along with the man’s right arm from the rest of his body.

“Oh geez, that ended up a little more sadistic than intended. I was just going to lop off his head. Third generations are nimbler than I expected,” said Melia with a scowl as she watched the groaning Iblis clutch at his stump.

“Okay, this is not looking good,” Harti said through labored breathing. The tides of battle had clearly turned against them. “In that case, it’s time for the trump card—”

“That’s enough.”

Sain appeared behind her in a flash of light. His movement was blindingly fast, as if he’d become light itself, and Harti didn’t even have a chance to react. Whatever she’d intended to do, it was too late. She lowered her hand, relaxed her shoulders, and let out a sigh.

“...Just my luck. Of all the people to show up here, it had to be the holy knight,” she said with a sense of resignation.

“Harti! Do something already!” screamed Iblis.

She looked at him and shrugged.

“What do you want me to do? We’re up against the holy knight, you know?”

And the one said to be the strongest ever, to boot.”

“Why did you go after your own sister?” demanded Sain as he held his radiant blade at her throat.

“Because she’s my sister. I love her, I care about her, and I want to be with her. Is there something wrong with that?” She glared at Sain. “Well... I guess his circumstances are also factored in.”

She motioned at Iblis with her chin.

“What do you mean?”

“I managed to integrate with a second generation, and Marni’s my sister, so the clan had high hopes for her compatibility, as well. My crippled recruiter over there fast-tracked his career in the clan when he pulled me in, so he was probably hoping to earn himself some more points with her.”

Then, she turned around, paying not the slightest attention to the blade at her neck, and faced Sain. The lack of hostility in her motion caught him by surprise and stayed his sword hand.

“You’re too strong, holy knight... and that’s why you’re an obstacle. Having you around will only weaken Marni’s resolve.” Emotions swirled in her eyes, subtle and complicated. “Can you take responsibility for the rest of her life?”

“...What do you mean?”

“That girl is struggling right now. She’s tearing herself up inside trying to choose the path she walks. Either she comes with me, or she stays with you. I can protect her... But can you? You, the holy knight... Can you swear in good conscience that you’ll always be there for her? You can’t. Eventually, you’ll leave her behind. It’s just a matter of time.

“The salvation you offer is fleeting. It’s the passion of a moment that serves nothing but your own ego. I won’t let you take my sister... You don’t have what it takes to look after her. To *keep her safe*.”

Her gaze was solemn and testing, filling the very air between them with tension. In response, Sain threw his head back and laughed. It was a disarming laughter — the kind that came from inside.

“Wow. *That’s* what you’ve been worrying about this whole time? That’s so... stupid!”

“...What did you just say?”

“I said that’s *stupid*. You don’t trust your sister at all.”

His words struck a nerve, and Harti bared her teeth in a fierce scowl.

“Harti.”

Suddenly, Marni spoke up. It was the first they’d heard from her since she’d curled into a ball on the ground. Now, there was a glint of determination in her eyes. Realizing that she was about to make her choice, Harti rushed to speak first.

“Marni, listen. You need to calm down and think about this carefully. Your friend might be the holy knight, but he can’t protect you forever. If you come with me, though... and if you gain the power of Chaos, I know you’ll—”

“I’m... okay now, Harti.” Marni looked up at her sister and held her gaze. “Ever since you left, I’ve been lonely... but now, I have friends. Friends I care about. Sain, Alicia, and Melia... None of them treated me differently when they found out that I’m a dark elf. And I... I trust them from the bottom of my heart.”

Her voice still trembled when she began, but it steadied as she spoke, growing in volume and confidence.

“That’s why,” she continued, “I’m not lonely anymore. I want to stay here. With everyone else... I can’t go with you, Harti.”

Her last few words carried with them the weight of finality.

For Harti, Marni’s time had stopped two years ago. She still saw her sister as the same person she’d left behind — her dear and delicate sibling who needed her protection to survive. That Marni, however, had ceased to exist. After a long pause, during which a multitude of emotions flashed across Harti’s face, she finally nodded.

“I see. You’ve... grown, haven’t you? Stronger.”

And then, her expression softened, and she gave Marni a look. It was one that Marni recognized — the same gentle, caring gaze of the sister she knew.

“Well, that’s it, then. I guess it’s time to say goodbye,” Harti said, making Sain’s eyes go wide. The least thing he was expecting was for her to back off so easily.

“...Are you serious? That’s it? Weren’t you here to take your sister with you?”

“I would if she wanted me to. I’m not going to force her. I never intended to. I am her big sister, you know? If she says no, then I’ll leave. That was the plan all along.”

She smiled. Her colleague, however, was not impressed by the turn of events.

“No way... There’s no way in hell I’m going to let it end like this!”

Iblis howled, his face twisted in bitter rage. Sensing that something was wrong with the man, Harti tried to placate him.

“Iblis, calm down. You promised you’d respect Marni’s choice—”

“Shut up!” he snarled.

There was a sudden *shiiick* — the sound of something sharp meeting flesh — and Harti grunted. Sain watched in stunned silence as a previously undiscovered Beast began to retract its long claw, now protruding from Harti’s flank.

“Ib... lis... You...”

“Stay out of my way, Harti. This is for the sake of the clan. I’m taking your sister back, whether she likes it or not. I might have to rough her up a little, but hey, if she’s lucky enough to survive the integration, then it’ll all work out fine.”

Harti stared daggers at him, but he paid her no mind as he walked toward Marni.

“And you, holy knight!” he shouted before Sain had a chance to move. “Stay right where you are.”

“S-Sain...”

“This is definitely not my best moment...”

Sain spun around to discover Alicia and Melia each in the clutches of large reptilian monsters. Pained groans escaped the girls as the monsters tightened their grip on them, threatening to crush them alive. Furthermore, behind each

of them was a Beast standing guard.

“How’s that for an ace in the hole, huh? Meet my little pets. They’re fourth-generation Fubaku Yuukai. Hehehe... Looks like even the mighty holy knight has trouble sensing things he can’t see.”

“...Damn you.”

The Founder, Fubaku Yuukai, had the ability to turn invisible. More specifically, it could hide both its shape and presence, making it impossible to detect even by sound or smell. The two monsters his attendants had been captured by were heirs to that power.

“Now don’t try anything funny. There’s only one of you, and there are two of them. You can’t save them both. If you don’t want them to turn into meat pies, then do what I say... You said you always wear light-binding seals to hide your powers as the holy knight, didn’t you? I want you to put those back on. Remember, you do anything weird, and they die.”

Sain had no choice but to obey. He took out the seals he kept in his coat pockets. One by one, he put the trinkets back on, starting with his silver necklace and ending with his grossly over-designed rings. Once he slid the final ring onto his finger, his holy power vanished. The next thing he knew, he was on the ground, clutching at where Iblis had driven a boot into his stomach.

“Ugh... Hngh!”

“Bahaha! What a sight! The holy knight himself crawling like a worm at my feet! Look at you! Without the blessing of the goddess, you’re *useless*!”

He stared with amusement at his victim before cackling to himself. Marni grimaced at Sain’s muted groans of pain, and she ran toward him.

“Stop!” Iblis snarled, causing Marni to freeze. “You, little miss Harti Junior, had better stay where you are.”

He waited to see that his orders were being obeyed before continuing.

“Good, good. Things were really starting to head south, but this is turning out just fine. Who’d have thought I’d be able to get rid of the holy knight in a place like this? Hah! It’s our clan’s lucky day! Harti’s sister is just a consolation prize

compared to this!”

He snapped his fingers, and a massive catlike monster appeared from the forest. With his holy power sealed, Sain stood no chance against it.

“...Sain.”

He heard a soft voice. He craned his neck up to find Marni looking at him. She said nothing else, but her unblinking eyes told him everything he needed to know.

You can do this. I believe in you.

Iblis made a gesture, and the menacing Beast slowly padded toward him. Sain watched as it approached. As he stared death in the face, his heart was filled not with terror, not with worry, but a single phrase that echoed in a voice he knew so well.

The unpracticed mind knows no composure.

To use dark magic, he needed to be cool and composed. The relentless mock battles Marni had put him through were to teach him just that. He mustn't panic. Slowly, he held out his hand. He forced out of his mind all his pain and exhaustion, leaving only cold, hard focus. Dark magical energy began to coalesce in his palm.

Remember and recreate.

He fettered his baseless fantasies of dark magic and dug through the mental archives of painful practice and hard-earned experience. He recalled the dark forest where he'd battled night monkeys and the tag-team training with Marni to practice his new spell. He felt a familiar tension in his muscles, their fibers yearning to repeat the motions he'd ingrained in them through countless repetition.

His sweat and toil had not been in vain. Dark lightning buzzed around the dense mass of energy in his palm. It lengthened before congealing into the form of a spear.

“Die, holy knight.”

The maw of death opened before Sain's eyes. He stared down the black abyss

as the final principle surfaced in his mind.

Never give up.

He must never allow his will to falter. Even in the face of despair, even if everyone else had given up hope, he had to keep reaching past the darkness for the victory that lay beyond.

“Dark Ray!”

The dark spear began its flight. It lanced through the air and disappeared into the woods like a shooting star, leaving a black trail in its wake. For a second, time itself seemed to freeze. Then...

“Gyaaaaaaaaaah!”

An ear-piercing scream echoed through the forest. The black trail of the spear led from Sain’s hand into the Beast’s throat, out the other end, and straight through Iblis’s torso.

“H-Holy... knight...?! H-How... dark... magic?!” gasped Iblis as he crumpled to his knees, one hand pressed to his side.

White flame shattered the darkness.

“Looks like the tides have turned,” said Alicia.

Melia made a wry face.

“I’m sorry it took so long.”

The reptilian Chaos that were Iblis’s aces in the hole lay defeated at their feet.

“Ahh... Ahhhhhh!”

Iblis paled at the sight of the two girls, both having freed themselves from their captors. In his confusion, he turned to the woman he’d personally harmed mere moments ago.

“H-Harti! Do something! Help me!” he screamed with panicked, bloodshot eyes. “I-I’m the one who brought you into the clan! You owe me! You have to pay me back, so help me!”

Harti, still wincing at her wound, slowly got to her feet. She looked at her little sister.

“Marni. You’re staying here, right?”

“...Yes.”

After hearing Marni’s answer, Harti turned to Iblis. Her expression darkened.

“Writhing needles of festering doom, be the thorns in the cursed one’s flesh!”

A strange incantation escaped her lips. Immediately, Iblis vomited a mouthful of blood.

“Urrggh!”

He stared at the crimson blotch on the ground in shock as black dots appeared all over his body. They began to grow in size, as if trying to consume him whole.

“S-Stop it! Harti! Please! Don’t!”

His pleading was met with a gleeful grin.

“Too bad.”

As soon as Harti said the words, even more blood was ejected from his mouth. Marni watched in shock as he collapsed onto the ground.

“No way. Is that... a curse?” she said, bewildered.

“It is. Once you have the power of Chaos, you can do stuff like this too... but I guess you’d have no use for it.”

Curses were a terrible power that the dark elves used to possess. They were the only ones who could use them, and the sheer cruelty of their effects struck fear into people’s hearts. The dreadful power was, in fact, the very reason dark elves came to be a hated race. Nowadays, their blood had become so mixed that dark elves could no longer use curses, but with Chaos enhancing every aspect of her power, it was no surprise that Harti had reclaimed the ability to use them.

“Did you... kill him?”

“No, he’s still alive. Just barely. We’re not exactly seeing eye to eye right now, but I still have some use for this man.”

Closer examination proved her right; Iblis was indeed breathing, albeit

weakly. He had lost a lot of blood, though, and he wasn't going to survive without immediate treatment.

"Well, then. I guess this is where we part ways," said Harti as she walked over to Iblis.

However, Alicia and Melia brandished their weapons at her.

"Do you really think we're going to let you go?"

"Seems sort of like wishful thinking to me."

Harti calmly gave them a questioning look.

"Look around you."

They heard a rumble in the distance. A cacophony of strange cries and violent thrashing rose in all directions. It was the noise of Beasts of Chaos rampaging through the forest.

"Iblis was using his power to keep a lot of Beasts on standby. Now, without their master controlling them, they'll just follow their destructive instincts. Pretty soon, there'll be a bloodbath."

"Damn it! Melia! Alicia! Get to work! We need to hunt down every last one of those Beasts, or they'll start killing the students!"

Neither of his attendants voiced any complaints about his decision — the safety of innocents took precedence over capturing Harti.

"Goodbye, holy knight... Take care of Marni for me."

While Sain rushed to direct his friends, Harti began to sling her incapacitated partner over her shoulder. All of a sudden, three spears of light shot through the air and buried themselves in Iblis's body.

"Wha—"

Blood splattered on her face as her jaw dropped in surprise. Almost simultaneously, the same spears of light fell upon all the Beasts in the area, nailing them to the ground. They let out short shrieks of agony before falling dead. Everyone was frozen in shock as they watched a young man descend from the sky. His blond hair fluttered gently, and his fierce blue eyes shone with

the majesty of a lion. He wore clothes resembling those of Sain — of the holy knight — but he was definitely a different person.

“...Cain Theresia,” Harti said, her voice slow and trance-like as if the words were escaping her not of her own volition.

Cain reached for a sword at his waist and drew it from its sheath. Then, without any flourish or flair, he swung it at Harti.

“Hngh?!”

She lurched back to evade the strike, letting go of Iblis in the process. His lifeless body fell to the ground.

“*Velle Darku!*” she shouted as she continued to back away. Omitting the incantation reduced the spell’s power, but it was still more than strong enough to wreak havoc on any humans in its way.

As the black tide rolled toward Cain, he swiped his sword sideways. A blinding arc of light shot out of his blade, crashed into the oncoming wave, and neutralized it completely.

“*Darku Shot!*”

She followed up with a barrage of projectiles. He dodged them all with precise, deliberate steps. Then, for the first time since his sudden appearance, she heard his voice.

“*Ray Javelin!*”

Pure, blinding luminescence exploded out of Cain, its intensity causing Harti to reel. Only after it flew past her did she realize it was a massive spear of light. The air in its wake seemed to sizzle, and it had disintegrated everything unfortunate enough to have been in its path — an errant leaf; an airborne insect; a left arm.

Harti screamed, grasping at what was left of her limb. A second later, Cain was already upon her.

“N-No, don’t...”

Marni’s trembling protest did little to slow Cain’s blade. It flashed, and the golden trail it drew was soon followed by a crimson arc. Fresh blood colored the

nearby trees.

“Auuugh!”

Harti’s leg — hampered by the gaping cleft in her thigh — failed to clear a protruding root. Her foot caught as she tried to step back, and she went tumbling to the ground. She landed hard and could no longer push herself back up. Cain stood over her and raised his sword.

“Stop!”

Marni’s desperate scream filled the air. It entered Sain’s ears and, without passing through his head, went straight to his legs. The next thing he knew, he was staring Cain in the face, the metal of their swords grinding harshly against one another.

“Holy knight...” Cain said, spitting out the words like bile. His eyes flared with leonine ferocity.

Sain grimaced against the intense pressure emanating from his opponent. It wasn’t just the physical force of the blade. There was something else, something invisible — an intrinsic understanding that the slightest lapse in focus would result in both him and Harti being cut in two. He’d heard more than enough rumors around the school about the extraordinary strength of the student council president. What he was witnessing right now, however, was something else entirely. To describe the student council president as “strong” was true, but improper. A horse was indeed stronger than a mouse, but the very act of comparing their strengths was in and of itself farcical. The Eldis twins and Marni — both contenders for first place in the field exercises — were certainly strong in their own right, but it would be ludicrous to compare them to Cain. From the light magic he’d used to the way he moved, everything the student council president did was clearly far beyond the realm of ordinary students. Their swords interlocked, they both continued to hold their ground. For a moment, a strange thought flashed in Sain’s mind. It almost felt like Cain was standing in opposition against *him*. Against the holy knight.

“Why do you stand in my way? Is that woman not one of Chaos?” Cain said in a harsh voice. “Has emotion clouded your judgment?”

Sain bit his lip. Was he doing the right thing? He wasn’t sure. His body had

acted before his mind. Perhaps Cain was right. Maybe he had let his emotions get the better of him.

“...Go.”

He directed the command at the wounded woman behind him. Emotions or not, the one thing he didn't want was for Marni's sister to be killed. Cain, however, posed a threat of unknown proportions. Sain couldn't be sure that he could fight him and protect Harti at the same time, so he needed her to escape on her own.

Harti clutched at the remains of her left arm and, breathing raggedly, forced herself to her feet. She quickly began to run off. Sain waited until her presence had disappeared into the distance before breaking off their clash and leaping backward.

“A holy knight who lets Chaos go free...” said Cain said with a wry, derisive smile. “You're ill-suited for the mantle... You'd be better off trading roles with me.”

Their eyes met, and what Sain saw in Cain's left him at a loss for words. There was hatred in those eyes — a bitter, rage-filled enmity that ran far deeper than the events of today. They both remained still for a while, gazes locked in silent stares.

Eventually, the teachers waiting outside the forest signaled the suspension of the field exercises.

Epilogue

The field exercises came to a close in an unprecedented fashion — suspended after numerous reports that unidentified monsters had appeared up in Trowa Forest. According to the students, the monsters were dark red, almost like blood, and their substitute pendants failed to protect them against the monsters' attacks. As soon as this news reached the teachers' ears, they quickly decided to call off the field exercises. Jenifa enrolled a number of children from noble families, after all, and the academy had much preferred for them to remain alive.

"Sir Knight, you have come to our aid again. I sincerely apologize for the trouble," said the academy's headmaster.

Sain shook his head.

"Don't worry about it. Dealing with Chaos is my job."

They were seated in the headmaster's office, and Sain had just finished telling him about the events that had transpired.

"I very much appreciate your understanding. Allow me to deal with the cleanup, then... Still, I must say, who'd have thought that Harti would align herself with Chaos?"

"...What kind of student was she?"

"A good one. Serious-minded, with a strong sense of justice. It must have been the circumstances surrounding her identity as a dark elf, and the duty she felt to protect her sister, that drove her to walk this path. Amongst her peers here at Jenifa, she was a rare breed, one who helped up the weak and stared down the strong. Her grades were exceptional, as well. Every bit the equal of your attendant, Melia, in fact... And yet, she never made a big show out of it. Never flaunted her strength. Truly, she was a wonderful student in every regard."

Sain nodded. Judging from the headmaster's description, Harti was not one to hurt others without reason. Even after gaining the power of Chaos, that part of

her personality seemed unchanged. It was, of course, also what had caused her to let down her guard, giving Cain a chance to strike.

“And the student council president? Who is he?” asked Sain. “When I told you someone else had killed one of the Beasts of Chaos that appeared outside the city walls, you told me that you had an idea who it might have been... I assume it was him.”

The headmaster quietly confirmed his suspicion.

“...That is correct. I’m terribly sorry, Sir Knight, but I must again decline to comment further. To be honest, I’m not privy to much of the details myself... but there is one thing I can say for certain.” He looked Sain in the face. “He hates the holy knight.”

Sain’s eyebrows went up in surprise.

“He... hates the holy knight?”

“Indeed. Granted, the holy knight he hates might not be you, specifically...”

Sain recalled the pressure he’d felt from Cain when they clashed in Trowa Forest. He remembered the hatred in Cain’s eyes. At the time, he’d wondered if it was just his imagination. Now, he knew it wasn’t.

“...Still, I’d advise some caution on your part,” the headmaster continued. “I assume you haven’t blown your cover yet?”

“Not yet. I probably gave him a lot of reason to be suspicious, though...”

“I’ll do what I can to help.”

Sain thanked the headmaster and took his leave.

Cain Theresia...

It was likely that the student council president already saw him as the most probable candidate to be the holy knight. The presence of Alicia, Melia, and Marni at the scene had all but guaranteed that. Being the last member of their group, his obvious absence was nothing but a red flag.

As he walked down the hallway, he found a pair of students walking toward him in the opposite direction. One was the vice-president of the student

council, Emilia. Beside her was the president in question. Neither made a sound as they approached. Then, just as they passed him...

“Are you the holy knight?”

“What are you talking about?”

Cain’s question was brief and sharp, like the swing of a sword. Sain parried it. Their gazes, parallel and opposite, never met.



Afterword Hello, I'm Yusaku Sakaishi.

The Holy Knight's Dark Road is a story about a protagonist who, though perfectly capable of easy-moding his way through life with his holy powers, chooses to abandon them and instead strives to become something he has no affinity for — the dark knight. In this second volume, said protagonist finds a mentor who can teach him dark magic. By apprenticing himself to her, he takes another step toward his goal. I hope you find it enjoyable.

And I've already run out of things to say. That's no good. What do I do now?

I remember having this same problem for the first volume, wondering what I'm supposed to write for the afterword, so I'm going to take a look at the afterwords of some other works for reference.

...I see. It looks like taking the contents of the story and comparing them to the author's own life is a nice, simple option.

This story's protagonist, Sain, has peerless power, but despite that, he chooses to hide his powers and walk a road for which he has no affinity. As a result, he ends up being made fun of in all sorts of places and called a loser by all sorts of people. Still, he continues to plow forward through sheer will and hard work.

There's something about his tenacity that I resonate with. As a matter of fact, I played tennis when I was in elementary school, and I kept playing through middle school and all the way into high school. Gradually, however, I realized that the reason I kept playing tennis wasn't because I liked it; it was out of habit. Considering my persistence was the result of inertia, willpower doesn't really come into play. Whenever I screwed up a serve, I'd be criticized, but I never played seriously enough for thoughts like *I need to improve my control!* to cross my mind. Finally, when I was in high school, I quit tennis.

Quitting tennis did, in fact, bring about some significant changes to my life. A lifelong — up to that point in my life, anyway — association with tennis comes with consequences, and one of them was having a lot of friends whom I had met through tennis. By quitting the sport, I also ended up distancing myself

from them. Up until then, I'd spent my days off playing with friends from the tennis clubs of other schools. Once I stopped playing, that obviously stopped, as well.

For someone like me, who had been playing tennis from elementary to high school, the tennis club felt like home. Tennis was both a place where I belonged and a tool with which to create that sense of belonging. By abandoning that, I left myself with nothing, and for a time, I lived as an empty husk of a human being.

Actually, I should rephrase. It wasn't so much inertia that kept me playing tennis as it was the only thing I was good at, so I had no choice but to cling to it. I was never a particularly charismatic person, but so long as I kept playing tennis, I could at least keep joining tennis clubs. And through the clubs, I could make friends. This logic, however, had been functioning unconsciously, and it wasn't until I quit tennis that I realized I'd been following it. After relinquishing my forte, I had no choice but to confront the reality that, compared to others, I now had no strengths to speak of, and no hobbies to take pride in. I had become a bland, meaningless person.

On the flip side, not having to take part in club activities meant I had a ton of free time to myself. At first, I spent it on things like anime and games — the usual otaku stuff — but at some point, I happened upon the existence of web novels. For some inexplicable reason, this triggered something in me, and I started writing my own novel.

Equally inexplicable was the fact that no matter how much I wrote, novel writing never felt like a chore. Furthermore, it was something I could always apply myself to — something I could play seriously, so to speak. I kept writing through university and even after joining the workforce, and as a result, I can now deliver a work of my own to the world as a professional author.

For my high school self, tennis was the thing I was best at and the only hobby I could take pride in. That's why I was left feeling so empty after giving it up. At some point, though, I realized that void had been filled by something else. And I'd become even better at that something else than I'd ever been at tennis. Never would I have imagined during my tennis days that such a future would be lying in wait.

I chose my path in life not according to what I can do but rather what I want to do. As I walk it, I've come to think that — for me, at least — it's a path with fewer regrets.

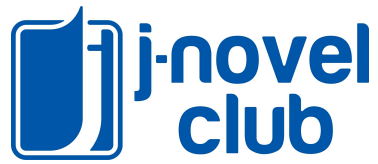
The protagonist of this story, Sain, also prioritized what he *wanted* to do over what he *could* do. He is troubled by how empty it leaves him, but even so, he keeps at it with dogged determination and tries hard to remake himself anew. Go for it, Sain... As one who has walked this path before, I'm rooting for you.

Oh wait, but unlike me, Sain has lots of female friends, doesn't he? He's even got a cute maid. I take that back. He doesn't need my rooting.

You're blessed enough as is, Sain. Heh.

That's a self-deprecating *heh*, in case you're wondering.

Special Thanks In writing this work, I received generous help from my editors, proofreaders, and a number of other individuals involved in its creation. Thank you. Also, I am once again grateful for Heiro's beautiful illustrations. Finally, to everyone who took this book into your hands, you have my endless gratitude.



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The Holy Knight’s Dark Road: Volume 2

by Yusaku Sakaishi

Translated by David Teng

Edited by William Haggard

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Author: **Yusaku Sakaishi**
Illustrator: **Heiro**



The Holy Knight's DARK ROAD

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